

**PURPLE &
ORANGE?**

#18

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PORTRAITS FOR THE GALACTICA - I

(By Marcia Brin)

ADAMA

Weariness and grief must wait.
The last remnant of a civilisation
Rests in your hands.



SHEBA

Warrior-daughter, last of your line,
Find welcome and new hope
In quiet emerald eyes.



SERINA

Too soon lost,
Sleeping for eternity, alone
Beneath the sands of a long-dead world.



TIGH

Long have we fought together.
I would ease your burden, old friend,
But I cannot.



APOLLO

Strong and gentle, duty-bound,
Far-seeing eyes guide a soul
That walks a greater path.

GUEST EDITORIAL: To a Mundane, or

What to Say to Your Mother When She Finds Out You Write/Illustrate/Edit/Publish a Fanzine

"Isn't that a waste of time?"

Anybody associated in any way with a fanzine has probably heard that line at least once in his or her lifetime. But what can we say to it? It doesn't serve the public welfare; it doesn't save any souls; and it certainly doesn't pay! So how do we justify spending our time on fannish publications?

We could start out by talking about the other "time-wasting" hobbies we could be involved with, but that's just likely to start an argument and antagonize somebody. Mother may not want to be told that we're worldly enough to know about drugs, sex, and sky-diving, anyway. So instead of getting negative, we have to concentrate on the positive aspects of being involved with a good fanzine.

Good, of course, is a relative term where zines are concerned, varying according to the intentions and abilities of the persons involved. Fandom has gotten a reputation for putting out a lot of trash over the years, and being miffed if private fantasies meet public censure instead of acclaim. We've created "Mary Sues," and tormented and done in our heroes and heroines in more ways than the original characters could count without flinching. Our serials are one broken-bone cliff-hanger after another. We've told bedtime stories about Han, Indy, the good Captain (Kirk, Apollo, Buck Rogers -- fill in the blank!) that we blush about afterwards, if we've got morals -- or slobber over if we don't.

Let's assume we're involved with a good zine, this being defined as something with a hard-working editor, interesting writers, conscientious artists, and other nice people working on it. It puts out a reasonably high-quality product two or three or four times a year; it's fun for all involved; it obeys the laws of amateur publishing. It's not somebody's ego-boo creation; nobody's trying to make bucks on the sly off somebody else's creation; it has a purpose beyond sexual and/or sadistic fantasies.

We don't want to concentrate on the fun aspect of it. Mother can guess it's fun; she knows the way our little minds work. So we'll point out something Mother can understand and appreciate. A good fanzine can teach you a lot.

Education. Mothers always want education for their children.

In the first place, naturally, there's the English language -- American or British version. We're learning things like simple writing skills, improved vocabulary, proper grammar and spelling, all of which carry over into our "normal" lives. We can learn the mysteries of descriptive phrases, depth of character, and plot devices, and can help teach other people -- our readers (we assume there are some) -- about them, too.

This can be especially helpful if we'd some day like to become professional writers. Practice, practice, practice. Many pros today got their start with little amateur publications yesterday. While some now may uncomfortably look down their noses at the past, others recall those days with fond memories -- and some even lend a helping hand, staying involved and boosting others along!

Ditto for artists, editors, and publishers. Practice, practice, practice!

Beyond these technical aspects of learning and perfecting the craft, there are social angles as well. By attending conventions, meeting people, carrying on correspondences all over the country (and sometimes the world!), and collaborating closely with new friends who share our common interest (the fanzine), we're learning to deal with other people. We're starting on a common ground and reaching out, growing together. And who among us can't do with new friends?

Fanzines have business angles which can be invaluable in our economic future. Understanding legal questions, planning workable schedules, meeting deadlines, handling publication money, marketing the product, predicting what the customers will want next time -- who says it's a waste of time learning to be a good business manager and salesperson? We're not allowed to make a profit on our zines -- they are, after all, someone else's creation, in most cases -- but no law demands that we go into debt for them!

That's a list of reasons most mothers will find acceptable. We're creating a good product -- maybe she'd like to read it herself? We're meeting and dealing with new people -- didn't she like that polite young couple who visited last month? Our skills are improving, and we're interested in learning new things -- hasn't she noticed? We're more self-assured, and we've got a healthy respect for earning and spending money -- after all, the allowance can only go so far.

We've become more responsible; we've become aware.

And that teaches us a lot about living in the mundane world, too.

Sharon Monroe

---Sharon Monroe
Guest Editor

FROM THE ADAMA JOURNALS:

Many times -- I would guess because of my extensive studies in ancient history -- people have asked me about the origins of the planet which spawned our Twelve Colonies.

The history of Kobol is, to say the least, extremely sketchy, and the things we do know for fact are few. There are many unsubstantiated stories and legends concerning the creation of life there. Most of them deal primarily with philosophy and external causes. I have never particularly subscribed to any of these -- except one.

The legend I favour is short and vague, not the least bit factual. This is odd for me, because I normally accept only what is established fact. Nevertheless, for me, it is enough.

"This is now your domain," said the Elder God.

The Younger God look up at him. "But what does one do with a whole world to one's self?"

The Elder God gazed upon his protégé and smiled. "One...dances," he replied.

never take rides from
strangers



"Never Take Rides From Strangers"

(By Sharon Giacomo and Anne Cecil)

The minute she saw him walk into the bar, Medea knew there was something very odd about him. She'd been watching the door closely, sitting with her back to the windowless wall. She'd picked up that habit the first time her name had gone up on one of the Hierarchy's wanted rosters.

The bar was a dingy little hole-in-the-wall just off the spaceport. Most of the clientele was human, or at least friendly to humans. He looked human, all right. Maybe it was the outfit he was wearing -- a dull brown, quilted tunic, long-sleeved, over plain brown pants tucked into dark brown boots. It had to be a uniform. Nobody would wear that colour by choice. In any case, there was some kind of insignia on his collar. He moved with the arrogance of one who habitually ordered others around -- and had those orders obeyed. Clearly, he was a military man.

He was reasonably good-looking, Medea decided. As he moved to the bar, surveying the scene -- without, she conceded, being too obvious about it -- she studied him in closer detail. Wavy dark hair, dragging a bit on his collar; green eyes over a nice nose, and a mouth that might be attractive if he smiled.

Their eyes met. Impulsively, she held the contact. This was a bar, after all. Why shouldn't she stare? And, besides, something in those eyes held her, some indefinable mixture of nervousness, worry, and determination.

The exchange was broken when the bartender waved a tentacle in the man's face. They got eager about being payed around here -- some of their customers left in a hurry.

Medea dropped her eyes to her drink and kept them there. "You're supposed to be staying inconspicuous, you idiot," she muttered, "not attracting attention, even from a handsome stranger."

"I haven't attracted anyone," a voice beside her barked indignantly, the sharp sounds of Wolvern short-talk easily overriding the noises of the bar.

"Sorry, Silver," Medea apologised. "I meant me, not you. I'm beginning to depend too much on the illusion, I guess."

"You Kyrie have the strangest habits," the grey-furred being grumbled. "Although I should be used to you." Medea silently agreed; he'd been mentor, friend, and co-conspirator, among other things, since the day of her christening.

Silver rubbed a paw over his muzzle, a twinkle in his silver-green eyes letting her know he was not seriously annoyed. Evidently finding an itch, he extended one claw and scratched enthusiastically.

"Not fleas again, I hope?" Medea inquired with mock politeness.

"If you're going to be insulting, I'll leave," he snarled in equally mock anger, and stood.

Medea smiled with false sweetness, knowing perfectly well he wasn't really angry. "Taking your fleas for a walk?" she asked, continuing what was an old joke between them.

Silver gave her another snarl, wordless this time, and stalked off, evidently not intending to tell her his real errand. Assuming, of course, that he had some purpose. It was boring, waiting for someone they knew to turn up and unstrand them, or for the Hierarchy to recognise and permanently ground them in one of their infamous prisons.

The stranger promptly took advantage of Silver's departure and moved in. Glass in hand, he approached with confidence, although he did exhibit an almost aristocratic courtesy. "I hope you don't mind if I join you," he said in a pleasant baritone. "I noticed you when I first came in."

Medea gave a non-committal wave of her hand. "It's a free bar."

He'd already settled into a seat opposite her. "Are you from around here?"

Medea simply stared at him. "Around here?" she finally asked in honest bewilderment. "The main planet of the Minderian Hierarchy? Do I look like a lizard to you?"

"Oh." He paused, looking as if the information was totally new to him. "No, of course not, you look very human. Uh, you are, aren't you?" A look of sudden alarm appeared on his face. "Human, I mean," he added.

Before her mind's eye flashed that ancient law all rebels hold sacred -- Never tell the truth if you can possibly avoid it. "Of course," she said quickly, trying for a tone of righteous indignation. If he was as human as he looked, he should be seeing a human female, short and slightly stocky, with a pretty, rather innocent face framed by curly brown hair. The clothes were nondescript, intentionally giving an impression of unthreatening softness.

If he wasn't... Well, her real appearance wasn't that far different from human, but it was certainly more striking. She felt a moment's uneasiness, but then he relaxed, smiling graciously, and said, "Well, good. My name's Apollo. What's yours?" He fixed what was clearly meant to be a limpid gaze upon her.

"None of your business," Medea responded automatically, ignoring a small, silly pulse of interest. This brought the conversation to a grinding halt.

Apollo stared dismally at his glass, as if seeking inspiration. After a moment, he looked up again. "Since I disturbed you, let me at least buy you a drink." He made the offer with a gentle smile that touched the corners of his eyes. They were really nice eyes, and they went well with that dark brown hair.

It would be against principles to turn down a free drink. "Sure," Medea said more agreeably. It couldn't hurt to let him buy her a drink. She was dying of curiosity, anyway.

What happened next fanned that curiosity. Apollo gestured to the bartender with his empty glass, and pointed to Medea's as well. That was certainly standard reorder procedure for beings who couldn't handle Galactic, but a little strange coming from a human who obviously spoke it perfectly.

The waitress, a human female with a wary cast to her rouged features, slouched across to the table with the two drinks, slopped them down, and held out a hand for the credits.

Apollo spilled a varied assortment of credits onto the table, and said transparently, "Now, how many of these do I owe you?"

Before the waitress could grab the largest credits, Medea took pity on the innocent. She gathered up the correct amount and shoved it at the drab, who lifted a corner of her lip in anger, then flounced off again.

"Thank you," Apollo said calmly. "I really appreciate your help." Medea had a sudden flickering of suspicion. He'd expected her to help -- had that been a test? But that thought was driven from her mind by his next words. "It's been a while since I used this currency."

Medea looked at him levelly. She said very slowly, "This currency is standard throughout the worlds of the Hierarchy." As an afterthought, she added flippantly, "And the Hierarchy keeps its claws on every populated world known."

"Oh," he gulped, then smiled weakly. "You must think me a little strange."

"Oh, no, of course not," Medea murmured sarcastically.

"Actually, I'm not from around here," he continued, tugging a little at the collar of his uniform. Those were very unusual insignia, she noted, her attention caught; pointed tips framed a design she'd never seen anywhere before. "I'm from another...plane of existence."

He wasn't smiling; his eyes met hers frankly, sanely. Still... "If you expect me to believe you're some sort of guardian angel, you're crazy," Medea said flatly. "Not that I couldn't use one," she mused.

"No! No, that wasn't what I meant...exactly." Apollo sighed. "It's hard to explain, because I don't really understand it myself. None of us does."

Medea felt a twinge of consarnation. "You're not by yourself?" she asked cautiously.

"There are five of us -- that is, if you count non-humans as beings," he said, an abstracted look on his face.

Medea stiffened. This character must be from one of those fanatic sub-cultures of "pure-bred" humans, who held that subjection by the Minderian Hierarchy was a natural consequence of tolerating non-humans. Most intelligent beings let these nuts keep their intolerance to themselves, treating them like the mental lepers they were. How had this one gotten off his home world? And, more importantly, how quickly could she get away from him?

He had crinkled his forehead in thought, but now continued, as if that had just been a pause for breath. "And if you don't count the Greenies -- since they never leave the cargo hold."

This last statement left Medea torn between two conflicting emotions: rabid curiosity -- Greenies? -- and wild hope -- cargo hold, he'd said. Calm, girl, stay calm, she told herself. "You have a ship?" she asked carefully, looking down at the table to hide her excitement.

Even with her care, anticipation must have come through in her voice. He drew back slightly in his chair, a guarded look appearing on his face. "Yes," he answered cautiously.

"Tell me more about yourself," she prodded, smiling, knowing she was over-reacting, but... A ship! A chance to get out of this trap! "And your ship. What's its name? Registry? Size? Clearance?"

"Apollo!" The shout echoed through the bar.

"Right here!" Apollo jumped to his feet, instantly gaining the undivided attention of every patron in the place.

Medea briefly considered sinking into the floor, or attempting to appear part of the woodwork, but her mastery of the finer aspects of psionics definitely didn't extend that far.

Her attention was caught by the man hurrying across the bar toward them. He was tall and lanky, dressed in a nondescript blue jacket and pants. He was a handsome human, with a strong jaw and deep-set brown eyes -- and the strangest colour skin she had ever seen. It was an implausible chocolate-brown. As he paused before their table, Medea pondered causes -- radiation burn, perhaps, or acid.

"Starbuck and Athena have been kidnapped!" he blurted, waving a hand in some agitation. "A bunch of lizards came up and took them away!"

"Jason, you'd better sit down," Apollo ordered, dragging him into the other chair. "We're attracting attention," he explained, settling back into his own seat.

"I don't think you can control that," Medea advised, smiling rather weakly. Being inconspicuous was definitely out, now. "Have you always been that colour?"

"Of course," Jason replied. "Don't you have humans my colour in this universe?"

"No..." Medea began. Abruptly, she realised how the question had been worded. "What do you mean, this universe?" To her own embarrassment, it sounded more like a panicked shriek than a cool, world-wise Kyrie's curious question.

Jason and Apollo exchanged vaguely annoyed looks. "We don't have time for that, now," Jason said quickly, glancing at her. "We have to save Starbuck and Athena!"

"What we?" Medea demanded.

The two men ignored her comment. Apollo, in what was clearly his best "take charge" manner, said, "Didn't they give any indication of why they were kidnapping them?"

"Arrest -- the word is arrest," Medea muttered, annoyed at both of them, and at herself, as well. Why was she letting them keep her here? "In case you hadn't noticed, gentlemen, the lizards are in charge here."

Jason looked startled, then musing, then finally nodded. "They did have an official sort of air," he agreed. "The one in charge was waving some kind of poster. I didn't get a good look at it, though it had a computer-generated look to it, like some kind of a daily fax sheet. Poor quality printing, really flimsy paper." He seemed to be sneering, as if computer-generated output was beneath him. Considering what the average human would risk just to get near one of the Minderian computers for a few minutes of over-supervised access, his attitude was original. He began to describe the Minderians, in response to Apollo's sharp queries for more detail. "There were three of them. They all wore these ugly green helmets -- a really arab colour, the worst possible colour for lizards who have purple scales. And they had on..."

A short bark interrupted him, as Silver came bounding toward them, providing a new attention-getter for the bar's clientele. "Thank the gods," he growled in short-talk. Laying a paw on Medea's shoulder, he established contact, radiating a sense of vast relief. "There was a rumour that you and Dell had been arrested. I knew, of course, it could not be Dell -- but..." He showed his teeth in a Wolvern smile and backed off, clearly waiting to be introduced.

Medea looked up at him, then transferred her gaze to the two strangers. Jason was attempting to slide as far back from Silver as he could; the expression on his face was an odd mixture of false friendliness and unease. Apollo was staring frankly at Silver, a calculating look in those deep green eyes.

Medea was forming terrible suspicions herself. "Couldn't be," she said in a tiny voice that didn't sound right, even to her own ears. "Surely... What does this Starbuck look like?"

Apollo straightened, his face clouding. "He's about my height," he answered evenly, his eyes pinning her to her chair. "Blond hair, blue eyes -- some people consider him handsome."

"Close enough," Medea moaned, squirming a little beneath the man's gaze.. It really wasn't her fault these innocents had happened along at a dangerous time. "There aren't that many blond humans around. They think he's a smuggler named Dell Clery."

Something in Apollo's face seemed to harden. He said flatly, "We'll have to rescue them, and you seem to understand this situation." There was no warmth in his voice. "I'm sure you can help us."

Medea glanced at Silver, who looked utterly confused. With someone in custody for her, they just might manage to make it off-planet -- if they hurried. Now was the time to leave these people, fascinating as they might be. Your own skin comes first, she reminded herself. "I really have business elsewhere," she announced firmly, standing up.

Apollo was out of his chair in an instant. He stepped past Jason, who had one eyebrow raised in surprise, and took her arm in a firm grip. "I'm afraid I have to insist," he said, ice in his tone.

Silver growled low in his throat, his eyes fixed on Apollo, and ran his tongue over his fangs. In one smooth, well-practiced motion, Apollo drew what was obviously a weapon, aiming it point-blank at her stomach. "I'll use force if necessary."

Silver snapped his teeth together in resigned submission. "So much for threats," he rumbled anxiously. "I don't suppose you could blow him up?"

"I don't know what he said," Apollo interjected, surprising her with a display of more perception than she'd expected, "but I wouldn't do anything dumb."

"My korum didn't raise fools." Medea glared at both Apollo and Silver, trying for moral superiority.

"March," Apollo ordered, directing her toward the door. Jason and Silver followed, both grumbling.

* * * * *

In the improvised stronghold across the courtyard from the guard headquarters, two people sat quietly on a window-seat, watching the changing of the guard.

Initially, Jason and Apollo had a small but heated discussion on taking their reluctant allies back



to their ship. Apollo argued successfully that time was of the essence; if Starbuck was "persuaded" to discuss the ship and her location, the situation could become very unhealthy, very rapidly.

So, instead, they coaxed Medea into pointing out the jail. They commandeered a small tailor's shop on the corner opposite the jail. The tailor was now tied up in back, and a "closed for the day" sign graced the door.

Jason, who turned out to be the owner of the ship, promised to get Medea and Silver off-planet; Medea then agreed to take a more active part in the rescue operation. In fact, she did feel mildly guilty.

Since none of the explosives she carried in her pouch were particularly powerful, she thoughtfully asked the strangers about acquiring something strong enough to "create a diversion." Jason volunteered to hustle back to the ship and bring some explosives that would do the trick.

In the meantime, while Silver -- who'd voted for staying strictly neutral -- sulked in a corner, Medea and Apollo studied the guards. She was sitting almost nose to nose with him, and Medea fervently hoped the man had no psychic talent -- at least, none that could penetrate her appearance illusion. It wouldn't do for him to suddenly see her in her true form, or even suspect her form. It would probably destroy what little trust he had in her, since he seemed to have a fetish for honesty among allies.

"See?" She directed his attention outward. "They're clumsy as hell, but they make up for it in sheer numbers. However, the diversion should pull most of them off. You'll have only the inside guards to deal with." She grinned, pleased with the idea. "As soon as your friend gets back, I'll get moving."

"Maybe you better tell us what you're going to do, so we'll be prepared," Apollo said, meeting her eyes. His were an interesting shade of green, framed by long, curly lashes. He was definitely too close.

Medea moved back a little, adopting an injured air. "I told you, I'm going to rig an explosion." She didn't want to go into details. She couldn't very well tell him she was going to finish what she'd been sent here to accomplish nine days ago. "Don't worry -- it'll keep them occupied."

Apollo shifted uneasily, no doubt nervous about being kept in the dark. Damn, but the man was suspicious; he must be used to some very evil-minded people. "Yes," he said. "But what exactly do you plan to do?"

"You really don't want to know." Medea tried for an airy dismissal.

"But I do!" Apollo raised his voice, reminding her that this man was used to obedience. She thought of reminding him that she wasn't under his command, but he evidently had that thought himself. He softened his tone with a noticeable effort, and laid a hand gently on her arm. "I'll worry if I don't know. I'm a Warrior. I couldn't let you endanger yourself on my account."

Medea sensed a genuine concern she really didn't understand. Had she done something to make him think her incompetent, or particularly childish? She was a bit young for a Kyrie, but there was no way he could know that. She frowned at him, then decided she might as well ask. "Do you think I don't know what I'm doing?"

"Well, you're only a... I mean..." He stopped, as if suddenly remembering some old conversation, but didn't explain. "Never mind," he said finally. They sat in silence until Jason returned,

laden with a sack he presented to Medea, proudly proclaiming the contents to be explosives.

Medea examined them quickly, marvelling at the interesting construction. They looked more like large saucers than any explosives she'd ever seen.

"What did you do, raid a museum?" she asked, feeling irritated. To be lost in one's own field made for bad temper -- she'd have sworn there was no explosive made she couldn't instinctively understand. "Give me a hint. What triggers them?"

"Timers," Jason said, as though it were patently obvious. His face was perfectly straight, but there was a glint of humour in those deep brown eyes.

"Where?" Medea asked with mock sweetness, trying to conceal her exasperation.

Jason took the small saucer from her and flipped it over. "Here." He pointed to a small panel she'd mistaken for a defect in the smooth rim. She pushed at it, and the centre section obligingly popped up, revealing a neat series of dials marked in totally obscure units.

"S-C-M," she read. "Somehow, I don't think setting this is going to be simple."

It quickly became clear that getting an exact definition of their time units was going to take far too long. Medea settled for a good approximation. "M is the short one, C is a while longer, and S is a really long time. Okay, I think I've got it."

She glanced at Silver, who was prowling restlessly in the corner. "Silver," she said quietly, bringing the Wolvern to quick attention, "give me an hour and twenty minutes. You'll know when it blows, I hope. Right by you?"

"Do I really have a choice?" he growled, coming over to lay a gentle paw on her cheek. "Be careful. You are important to me, sister."

Medea laid a hand over his paw and smiled at him. He was her bond-mate, her sibling-in-heart. She answered in short-talk; this was nothing for strangers to share. "I'm always careful about what I blow up," she said with a fond look. "Don't worry, cub-brother."

He pulled his lips back from his closed fangs, his version of a human smile. "You, I have worried about from the day we bonded," he teased, dropping his paw. "I am too old to change now."

As she turned away, she saw a mixture of consternation and open curiosity on Apollo's face, and laughed inwardly. Let's spread the confusion, she thought. No sense in me being the only one at a loss.

"See you at the ship," she told them, shouldering the pack of saucers as she left.

* * * * *

Medea retreated to an alley near the power station entrance, set down the pack, and sat next to it, concentrating on rearranging the outer world's perception of her. It was unfortunate that her illusory talents didn't work on non-humans; it would have simplified things so much.

A victim would suit her purposes best, she decided. That would appeal to the better instincts of the humans going back to work. It would at least get them into the alley. With a little luck, she'd finish her work with them before some lizard popped in to spoil the game.

Transformation finished, she propped herself against the wall and waited until she sensed a human approaching. She commenced a keening wail.

"Gentle being? Are you hurt?" a male voice inquired.

Medea opened her eyes and looked up at the uniform-clad man. Goddess be praised, a worker at the station on the first try! He knelt in front of her, and made the mistake of meeting her eyes.

"You have helped me. You feel good about that," she said in measured tones. "You will forget this meeting." The man nodded, a sappy smile on his face, and a glazed look in his eyes. "You will take this and place it in your section, out of sight." She handed him a saucer. "It is a present for a friend. You are hiding it as a surprise. You are happy about the surprise."

"I am happy," he giggled obediently. Medea shuddered involuntarily, then reminded herself that this was for a good cause. Besides, humans who worked for the Minderians weren't nice guys -- or they didn't last long at their jobs.

"Go to work," she ordered.

The man stood up, carrying the saucer, and left the alley. Medea waited patiently for another worker to approach, then resumed her wailing.

Her luck held. She attracted no Minderians, and no curious policemen. Those good samaritans who weren't station crew, she sent away empty-handed, with smiles and a sense of self-respect. By the time she'd gotten rid of all the bombs, it was only a few minutes until explosion time, as nearly as she'd been able to calculate. She decided to stick around -- for purely professional reasons, just to see how well it worked.

The initial explosion took her by surprise, even though she was expecting it. She watched in amazement as the main tower collapsed, quickly followed by the roof. Medea felt her mouth drop open in shock. She murmured to herself, as she moved away from the area, "I may have to apologise for that 'museum' crack!"

* * * * *

When she saw the ship, she had second thoughts about the apology. Not only was it small, but also it had obviously been a long time since anyone had worked on sprucing it up. It wasn't any design she knew -- in fact, the only thing she could compare it to was a child's top, turned upside down.

Her inspection was interrupted by the unmistakable tromp, tromp, tromp, of a squad of Minderian troops. Medea didn't waste any more time. She ran up the open ship's ramp, wheeling around at the top, intending to dog it shut. She saw a neat array of unlabelled buttons set into the bulkhead beside the hatch.

After she'd finally hit the right combination of buttons, and the hatch swung shut, she roared out, "Get this crate moving!"

"We can't." Silver sounded annoyed; she'd been aware of his warm presence behind her for several minutes, but she'd been working furiously on the lock. Now, she pivoted to look at him. He growled in disgust, "The human we rescued -- he's out somewhere, drawing moustaches on your wanted posters."

For a moment, she simply stared at him, doubting her ears. From anyone else, she'd have assumed a

bad joke. From Silver... Disbelief warred with resignation. "What else?" she muttered at last, rubbing her temples. She became aware of the beginnings of a headache, a partial consequence of her recent activities. She met Silver's dark grey eyes, a pleading in them. "What is he doing?"

Beyond him, one of the strangers entered the airlock. His even baritone proclaimed Apollo before his face was visible. "If you're talking about Starbuck, he's out drawing moustaches on wanted posters."

Medea took a deep breath, trying to calm down, but it didn't help. "Why?" she yelled, losing what little composure she had left.

Apollo reflexively backed up a step. "To disguise them, of course," he said, eyeing her warily.

Medea glared back, her hands on her hips, one foot tapping angrily on the floor. "I have heard of some dumb ideas." She kept her voice down with an effort. "I have even been party to a few. But this idea is the craziest, most ridiculous, most asinine..." She gasped for breath, then spoke very slowly. "The posters aren't permanent. They're bio-degradable material. They dissipate after a few hours. The Minderians just run off new ones from the central computer."

Apollo frowned at her as if she were the one showing a lack of understanding. "Of course," he said, in that all-too-reasonable tone. "How else would they do it?"

They were interrupted by a heavy thumping on the outer hatch. Apollo stepped past her and flipped a switch.

The airlock resounded with a booming voice. "...in the name of the Hierarchy! Once again, I command you to open the hatch in the name of..."

Apollo flipped the switch off.

"I wish I could say it's been nice knowing you," Medea told Apollo sarcastically, one hand unobtrusively reaching for Silver's paw. Silver was there, as always, warmly reassuring, easing her fears by sharing them.

Apollo turned without speaking, and walked into the ship. Lacking any more constructive idea, she and Silver followed him, hand in paw.

The first compartment was a lavishly over-decorated common room. The most impressive feature was an elaborately carved bar on the left side of the room. It was not your ordinary luxury bar; this one was done in a gently glowing green metal that had garish shapes carved in relief from floor to ceiling. It was encrusted with some kind of red gemstones that glittered malevolently from sockets randomly placed in the green metal.

Medea stopped, a little overwhelmed, then noticed that she was sinking slowly into the carpet.

"This carpet!" Silver keened, his eyes on his feet. "It's almost better than grass!"

Medea turned her attention to the two beings she'd sensed in the room. She recognised Jason, who stood beside one of several low couches, presenting a wine glass filled with blue liquid to the room's other occupant -- a strikingly beautiful brunette, under-dressed in some silvery material held together by string. The woman had a marvelously even complexion, and a surprisingly healthy skin-tone for someone who must suffer a good deal from over-exposure.

"Ah, Athena, this is the other member of your rescue squad," Jason said gallantly, with a small

flourish of his hand in Medea's direction. "She hasn't told us her name yet..."

The woman on the couch interrupted. "Medea, I do want to thank you," she said graciously, in a voice that chimed with sweet sincerity. Of course, with a body like that, she'd have to sound good, too, Medea thought sourly.

Jason looked somewhat quizzically at the brunette, and Medea tried to shift the emphasis. "That didn't take you long to figure out," she said.

Athena smiled, but her eyes held an odd reserve. "After protesting endlessly that I wasn't 'Medea L'alet,' I'm not likely to forget the name!" She ended her remark with a cheery little smile that made her sound particularly witless.

"Now that I see you side by side... No offence, but how could they ever mistake Athena for you?" Jason asked in obvious bewilderment.

"One human looks like another," she replied. Jason and Athena exchanged confused glances. "To a lizard," Medea amplified. "They even have trouble telling men from women, if they're dressed alike."

"Speaking of Minderians," Silver growled, giving her hand a squeeze, "there's still a bunch outside the door."

"Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten," Medea said to herself, speaking aloud in amazement, and shook her head. "And we can't lift because that damn fool is out there playing artist."

"Are you referring to my husband?" Athena asked with mild concern.

"I should have guessed," Medea sighed. "Starbuck is your husband." Athena nodded, an unfathomable smile on her face.

Apollo stepped into the room, coming from the far door to the right. "How soon do they usually send out a second patrol?" he asked Medea.

For a moment, she couldn't answer. She shot Silver a look of mingled disbelief and appeal, but the Wolvern only wrinkled his muzzle at her. "What happened to the first set?" she asked plaintively, turning back to Apollo. "Or dare I ask?"

Apollo affected a nonchalant pose, hooking a thumb in his belt. "I dropped the loading net on them," he informed her, in an overly casual tone.

"The loading net?" Medea looked blankly at him. "The loading net is over... No, I won't ask."

Silver made a strangled noise halfway between a groan and a yip. "These people may be smarter than they look," he growled.

Absently, Medea commented in short-talk, "They'd have to be." Then she switched back to ordinary Galactic. "I've never known the first squad to get, um, tangled up. I have no idea how long it will take."

"Starbuck should be back soon." Athena batted her eyelashes in what was evidently intended as reassurance. "We had a plan."

"Well, that's different," Jason said expansively. Medea looked at him sharply, and saw the

sardonic twist to his thick lips. He let his mouth widen into a natural smile, and said, "Would you care for a glass of wine, Medea? It's good Caprican vintage."

I will not ask, Medea thought resolutely. "Sure," she said aloud. Jason handed her a glass half-filled with a ruby liquid. Medea took a sip, decided it wouldn't kill her, and nodded toward Silver. "My com have some, too?"

Jason looked extremely dubious, but he turned and headed back to the bar.

"Your com?" Apollo asked, curiosity fairly oozing from the man. "Com what?"

"My companion," Medea said firmly. Explaining her cub-brother would take a great deal of time, not that they would understand if she did try to explain. In any case, she wasn't about to have the tables turned on her. "You owe me some explanations, mister."

"I suppose that's true," Apollo conceded, running a hand through his dark hair. "In the world we started in..." He was interrupted by a loud banging, in a distinctive rhythm, coming from the outside hatch.

"That must be Starbuck," he said hastily as he moved toward the airlock, clearly glad to abandon the discussion.

"Humph," Silver snorted, ignoring her plaintive look. "Trusting souls, aren't they? That could be a second squad. I suppose you can't tell?"

"Beyond my range," Medea answered bemusedly. Silver nodded in resignation, and she added, "Presumably, that was some kind of signal. Still, I hope he checks first." After a moment, she leaned back, and said in short-talk, "Whoever, it's human."

A blond, undeniably handsome young man appeared in the archway. He wore a silvery-grey shirt over royal blue trousers that fit into sleek grey boots. To Medea's utter astonishment, the shirt was decorated with intricate embroidery in a blue thread matching the pants. If his eyes had been grey and his hair black, he could have easily passed for a Kyrie. The sheen of the material, the complex pattern of the embroidery -- she would have sworn no other race in the galaxy could have duplicated that. Beside her, she felt Silver stiffen, his ears rising in equal surprise.

"I got them all done," the man Medea assumed was Starbuck announced, a wide grin on his face. Apollo appeared at his elbow, sporting an equally wide grin.

"Praise the Goddess," Medea snapped in ill-concealed annoyance. Silver gave a small woof of amusement and put a paw on her shoulder.

"You may want to sit down," Apollo advised, sitting down and patting the seat beside him. Medea managed to ignore the gesture. "We're taking off now." He sounded disappointed.

Medea glanced around, as she felt the beginning rumble of the ship's engines. Straining her senses to their limits, she could detect no more nearby life auras. "Pilot?" she grated, her eyes on Apollo.

"Oh, Cy can handle a simple take-off," Starbuck reassured her, as he took a seat on the couch beside Athena. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Dear," -- Athena sounded so wifely it almost hurt -- "she's the woman tney thought I was -- Medea L'alet."

"But she doesn't look a bit like the wanted posters!" Starbuck protested, a puzzled frown replacing his smile.

Every eye moved to focus on her. "I'll just sit over here," Medea said quickly, taking a seat near Silver. Her furry friend had already curled up on the carpet, more comfortable than she'd seen him in a long time.

"Silver?" she asked hopefully in short-talk. Silver wrinkled his nose at her and woofed once. The meaning was clearly, "You're on your own." "Thanks, friend," she replied crossly. She stretched her face in her most beguiling grin, simply adding to the strained silence.

There was a momentary surge, an increase in the gravity, not particularly unpleasant. The ruby wine sloshed over the rim of her glass as she jerked in response. Medea considered putting a boot over the spots on the carpet, but decided against it. She didn't want to look as if she cared.

The intercom beeped to life, making her jump again, and adding to the spots.

"Captain-Apollo-to-the-control-room," a stilted mechanical voice said. "Enemy-ships-are-approaching."

Apollo and Starbuck lunged to their feet and raced through the far door. Medea stood up more slowly, setting the half-empty wineglass on the floor.

At least, she thought to herself as she walked to the door, the confusion works both ways. Still, if no one ever gets to explain, it's no wonder they all sound so confused.

Apollo and Starbuck were already seated in the control section, their hands busy manipulating switches at what Medea recognised as pilots' boards, though they looked a little non-standard to her. She moved up behind them and stared out the viewport. Three Hierarchy cruisers were right in front of them.

"Shells!" she spat. "Quick, cut in the jump drive! They've got enough firepower to take us apart atom by atom!"

"Jump drive?" Starbuck threw her a puzzled look before turning back to his board.

"This is a fast ship," Apollo explained, without lifting his head. "True, it's no battlestar, but we should be able to outrun them."

Medea's stomach dropped to somewhere in the region of her knees. "Outrun," she said dully. "No one outruns anything in this universe -- not in conventional slower-than-lightspeed drive."

"Why not?" Starbuck was obviously still not convinced.

"Because there are certain limits to conventional drive speed, and everyone has reached those limits," Medea explained quietly. "Especially those battle wagons out there breathing down our necks."

"What do you suggest we do?" Apollo looked up at her, his mouth grim. He looked mildly sick, as if he already knew the answer.

"Well," Medea drawled a touch maliciously, "you can surrender. Or you can get blown out of space." She looked back at the cruisers and sighed softly, knowing what awaited her with the Hierarchy.

"Just about the same thing to me, anyway. Do what you..."

A sudden flare of intense brilliance interrupted her, seeming to explode directly in front of them. Instinctively, they all closed their eyes, but there were definite after-images.

"Hey! They fired at us!" Starbuck exclaimed indignantly. Medea didn't bother looking incredulous -- she simply prayed for guidance.

"Plasma bolt," she labelled it tiredly. "A warning shot. In words of one syllable -- stop."

"They don't ask you to surrender first?" Starbuck protested with some heat.

"Ask? Them? You've got to be kidding," Medea muttered, as she returned to the common room. Living in a polite universe would at least be different, she decided. She went to the bar, picked up a bottle, and took several long slugs directly from it.

Jason moved toward her. "Go easy on that," he advised in a low voice.

Medea looked up at him, her lips curving in a sardonic smile. "I decided to die drunk," she told him. "Any objections?" He merely looked concerned, as if he thought she was acting foolishly.

She looked down at her curled-up cub-brother. "Do you realise they don't have jump drive?" She'd meant to simply state the fact, but it came out with a touch of anguish.

Silver uncurled in one fluid motion. "What?" he howled. "No jump? You mean...? None? We're dead!"

"Right," Medea answered bluntly, too upset for short-talk. "We're dead. The Minderians won't pull punches this time. They're still mad because I blew up the flagship."

"Do you make a habit of blowing things up?" Jason's mouth curved in amusement. His dark brown eyes sparkled.

"Oh, you liked the diversion?" Medea asked, neatly side-stepping the question. Even if they were going to die soon, there was no sense in advertising herself as the resident demolitions expert for the rebels. The less they knew, the better.

"Diversion?" The big man seemed taken aback. "If that's what you call a diversion, I'd hate to see what you call a real act of sabotage!" He shook his head and turned back toward the couch, deftly picking up a flask of wine as he moved.

Silver came over, and she looked up at him, eyes holding his. He touched her shoulder lightly, establishing their mental link. Medea reached up to place her hand over his paw, closing the link.

It's been a long trail, cub-brother, she said through the link. A good one, too.

Long trails always come to an end, Silver thought in sorrow. At least, sister, we end ours together. There will be no aloneness for either.

And that in itself is blessing indeed, she agreed. We've been together as long as my memory extends -- but, shells, I'm not ready!

Together, we can face it, as is proper. Silver's thoughts soothed her rebellious spirit. Medea closed her eyes as he pulled her into his arms, allowing herself to absorb the tranquillity of his

personality, letting him take some of the fear from her. Finally, she opened her eyes and stood back, a small smile playing at the very edges of her mouth.

As Silver moved back toward the couch, she caught a brief glimpse of Athena's and Jason's expressions. They wore equal looks of bemusement and unfounded suspicion. As she met Athena's eyes, the woman blushed slightly and politely looked away.

There was a clunking noise from the hatchway. Medea sensed the lizards' presence, but she was still wrapped in the calm of Silver's empathy. She sank down on the couch.

The arch filled with a typical Minderian soldier. Its muddy green helmet perched on top of its head, matched by muddy green battlejacket and breeches. The scales on its arms glinted in the interior lights, reflecting their distinctive purplish sheen. Medea reflected yet again how totally colour-blind the lizards must be.

The first lizard stepped aside and took a formal salute position, a manoeuvre which involved raising the tail so it pointed stiffly upward, raising one paw in the air, and baring a not-inconsiderable amount of teeth. Jason began snickering uncontrollably, and finally took a long gulp of his drink to shut himself up.

The next lizard was so tall it was forced to duck to enter the room. Medea was also aware that someone had entered from the control room behind her, but she didn't bother to turn around and look. She knew, despite their silly demeanour, just how dangerous the Minderians could be. After all, how else could they have ruled the galaxy for uncounted years?

"Who is the captain here?" the Minderian rasped.

Jason spoke up. "This is my ship," he announced proudly. "What do you want?" He was lounging on the couch.

"You will stand while addressing the Commander, human!" the guard snarled, one paw going toward its weapon in obvious warning. Jason shrugged and unfolded from the couch, visibly reluctant.

"You still haven't told me what you want," he reminded them.

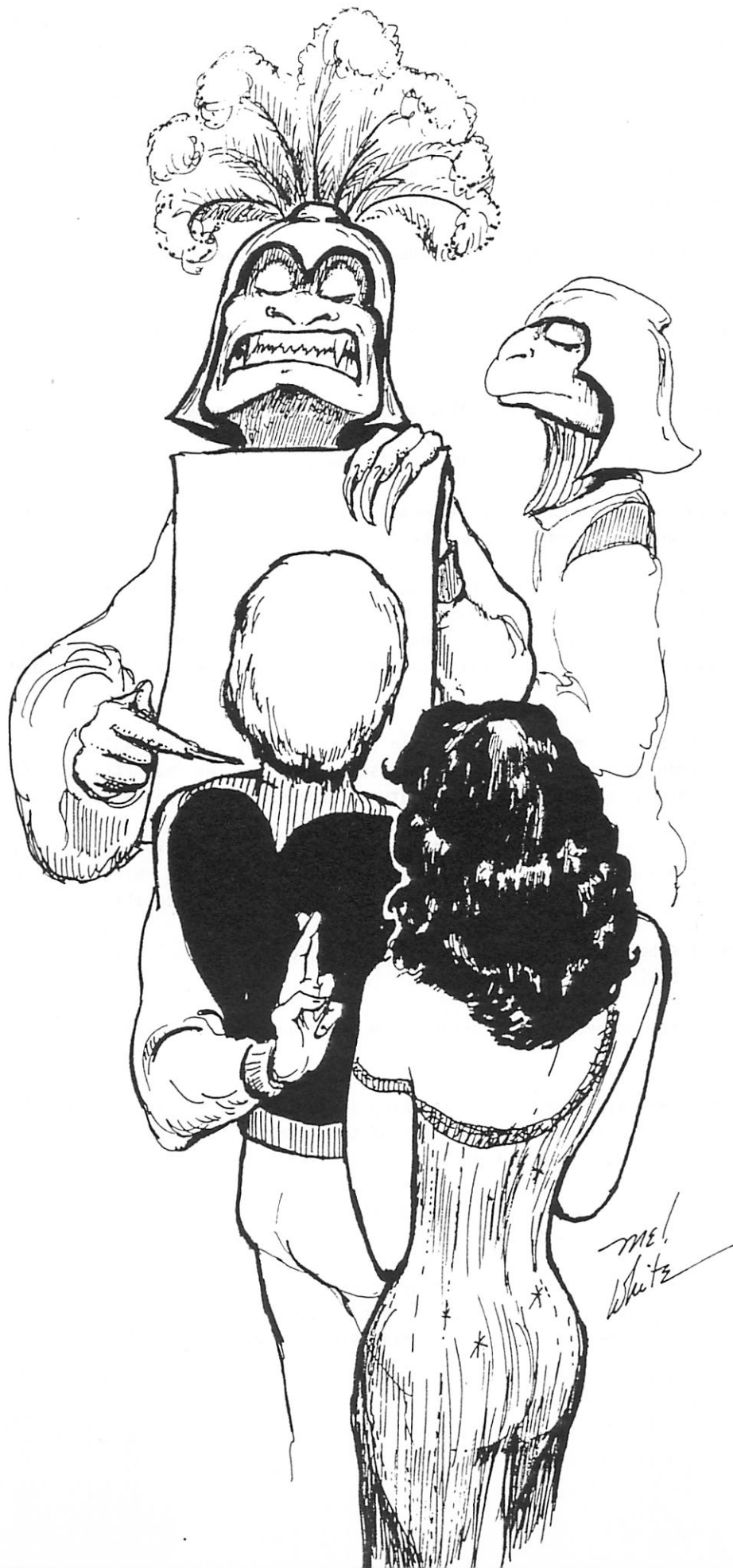
"I am in charge here," the Commander sneered. "I will ask the questions. Do you have the notorious female rebel Medea L'alet on board this ship? Or her human companion, the infamous smuggler Dell Clery?"

Jason raised a surprised eyebrow at the descriptions. "Of course not. This is our whole crew; do you see her here?" He waved expansively, a transparently phony grin splitting his face. Medea gave a thankful prayer that lizards couldn't follow human expressions at all.

The Commander hissed quickly at its subordinate and held out a taloned hand. The underling slapped a flimsy fax sheet into it. The leader studied it, then inspected each of them in turn, excluding only Silver.

Then, to Medea's amazement, it crumpled the sheet and dropped it to the deck. Non-humans can see through the illusion -- I know they can, she told herself. But the lizard spent twenty minutes giving them a lecture on the dangers of abusing trader clearance, and the necessity of reporting take-offs.

They obviously haven't found the attack squad yet, Silver thought to her, tightening a paw on her arm. He was nervous, too.



Then, to her utter consternation, the Minderian about-faced while the underling stiffened into salute position, and left. The underling hastily followed.

"I don't believe it," Medea said in a dull kind of shock. "Why didn't they arrest me?"

"The moustaches!" Starbuck said gleefully. Medea looked around, startled to find him leaning on the wall alongside Apollo. She shook her head; she must be slipping. She'd been sure only one person had come in from the control section.

Athena gave her husband a wifely kiss on the cheek. Starbuck looked insufferably pleased with himself.

Medea glanced at the fax sheet, which was rapidly disintegrating into the carpet. "I don't understand."

"He reprogrammed the image," Apollo said, as if it should have been obvious to her.

"You could just walk in and...reprogram...a strange computer?" Medea faltered. "What are you?"

"We might ask you the same question," Athena said, suddenly looking much sharper. "You don't really look like what you seem to look like."

Apollo gave his sister a pained look, but Jason managed to cut him off. "We all have things to explain," he said tactfully. "We're not likely to be interrupted again. We've fulfilled our part of the bargain -- you're off-planet. You did your part -- we have Starbuck and Athena back." He paused for a moment, his dark eyes searching her face. "Where we go next -- and how -- that's another question, isn't it?"

She glanced at Silver, meeting his eyes in unspoken question. The Wolvern shrugged slightly and nodded once, without words or thoughts. It wasn't often she let the illusion slip, since there weren't many of her people in space. Her natural appearance was too easy to trace.

"In the interests of establishing absolute honesty," she said lightly, by way of introduction, "and since the disguise isn't really necessary now..." She relaxed her tight control on their perceptions of her. The extent of the sensation she provoked was totally unexpected.

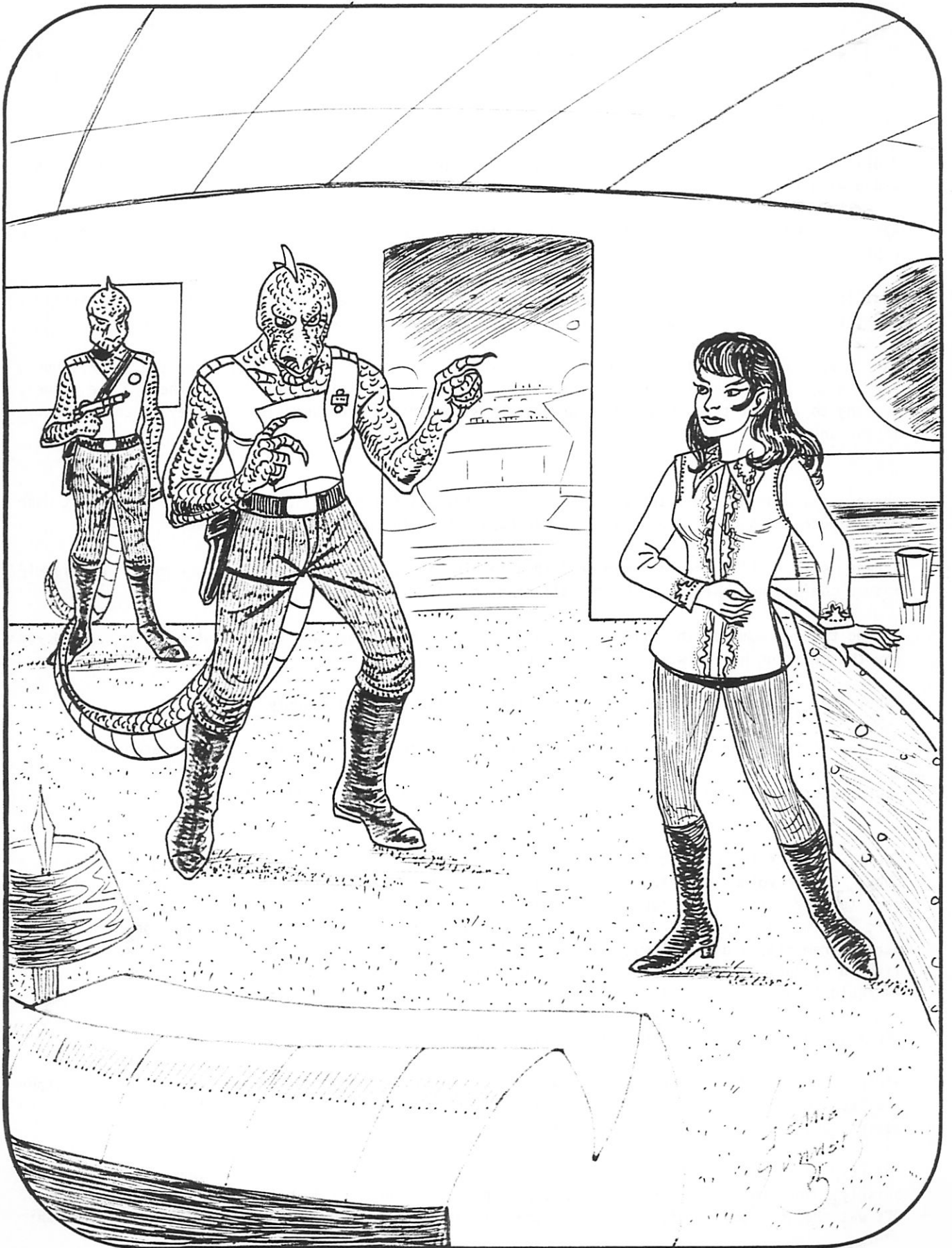
"Great Lords of Kobol!" Apollo gaped inelegantly. "You..." He collected himself visibly, clearly embarrassed by his slip. The rest stared.

Medea raised one forked eyebrow and studied him with surprise. "I know it's a change..." she began.

Starbuck grinned and said, "Oh, it's a striking appearance, all right. Especially compared to that innocent face she was wearing. The contrast of the grey eyes with that black hair, and the dramatic forked eyebrows -- doesn't it look familiar to you?"

Athena's voice dripped venom. "Compare the embroidery on her shirt with the one Starbuck's wearing. And notice how many fingers she has."

Medea spread her hand in front of her, studying her six fingers in puzzlement. She raised her eyes finally to meet unanimous hostility. Silver, attuned to the emotions in the room, was growling deep in his throat, where only Medea could hear him, and she felt the light touch of claws against her arm.



"Did we miss something?" she asked, her voice cold. The hope of avoiding a nasty confrontation seemed very dim, judging from Silver's behaviour. It would be nice if she had a clue as to why.

"You're Kyrie." Athena made it an accusation.

Medea's expression of surprise didn't have to be faked. "That's true," she agreed. "So what's wrong with that?"

Apollo looked a little less stern. "We had some very unpleasant experiences with your people," he explained.

That didn't make sense, Medea thought grumpily. "Wait a minute." She waved a finger in Apollo's direction. "You had me convinced you were from another universe."

"We are," Jason said in his deep, resonant voice. "But there were Kyrie there, too." He stopped for a moment, a thoughtful frown on his face. "At least one ship's worth. Athena," he added, turning to look at the woman, "did Zareth or his companions ever suggest that they weren't...native to our universe?"

There was a nagging familiarity to the name Zareth, but the memory eluded Medea. She let the matter retreat to her subconscious, in the hopes it would come up with the answer.

Athena said, "I'll try to remember," in a feeble voice, and shivered. Starbuck moved immediately into a comforting position, one arm half-cradling his wife.

Trying to thaw some of the silence, Medea said, "You should have wondered about me before, when you saw the relationship between me and Silver."

"What does your daggit friend have to do with it?" Apollo asked sharply.

"No Kyrie strays far without his or her bond-mate," Medea answered, trying to be reasonable.

"Bond-mate? What does that mean, exactly?" Apollo was still clipping his words, very military-style.

"Well," Medea said, groping frantically for a simple explanation, "at my christening, when I was a baby, Silver volunteered to bond with me, to stand for me and with me for the rest of my life. He came to live with me, and taught me things, and looked after me, and kept me sane. He's as much a part of me as...as my right arm." She warmed to the explanation. "I couldn't bear to be long parted from him, and when I mate, he must mate, too, with my chosen's bond-mate, so we will all live in harmony." Medea stopped, realising nervousness had led her into babbling. "No Kyrie would -- could live without a Wolvern bond-mate; they'd go insane with uncontrolled emotions."

"That sounds like Zareth!" Starbuck said brightly, but his eyes were still cold.

Athena looked at Medea, her eyes shadowed and withdrawn. "There were no bond-mates of another species on that ship," she said in a low, clear tone. "There were strange fittings in some of the cabins, but the Kyrie refused to talk about their past. Ever."

The very thought of being without Silver was too painful to consider. Medea shook her head briskly, and the memory fell into place. She caught her breath, half in wonder, half in sorrow. "It was probably too painful for them!" she exclaimed softly. "Zareth was Kyrie, from this

universe, the captain of an exploration ship, who set out to find a place beyond the reach of the Lizard Hierarchy." Her voice soured with unintentional irony. "When that ship set out, there was an evenly balanced crew of Kyrie and Wolvern -- and they all expected to come home again."

"You talk as if that was a long time ago," Apollo said with a frown.

"Time," Jason snorted, dismissing it with a wave. "When we change universes, everything else changes -- the stars, the galactic currents, the kind of people... Why should time be constant?"

"Yeah," Starbuck nodded. "There sure wasn't any way of telling time in that grey void we popped out in, the first time. Just because it only seems like three sectors ago that we were running from Zareth..." He paused, struggling with the concept.

"Sectors?" Medea said. "That's the longer one, like weeks?" There seemed no satisfactory response, so she went on. "It's only been three weeks since you had this 'bad experience' with Kyrie? No wonder you're still a little jumpy." She tried a half-smile of understanding, but they didn't look mollified. She didn't want to know what her fellow Kyrie had done to these people, not while it was such a painfully touchy topic. She decided on a shift of subject. "How long have you been doing this...universe-jumping?"

"That's just it." Jason cleared his throat uncomfortably and looked around, but the others seemed content to give him the floor. "We'd just escaped Zareth -- maybe it was something he did?" He looked at Medea, but she stared right back, her face carefully blank. "Anyway, it looked like the Kyrie were going to catch us, and then, suddenly, we weren't there any longer."

"We weren't anywhere!" Starbuck said explosively, grimacing in memory.

Jason winced as well. "It was a grey void, featureless. Nothing registered on the instruments, nothing was visible out of the ports..."

"It was worse than the great gulf we went through on the way to Kobol," Starbuck commented cryptically.

"Fortunately," Jason went on, picking up his narrative again, "we didn't stay there long, though it seemed a long time. We came out in an asteroid belt. We were there about a sector, and it's a tribute to the skill of our pilots" -- he waved toward Starbuck and Apollo; Starbuck looked insufferably smug, and Apollo looked uncomfortably heroic -- "that we survived. About a sector ago, we arrived here, in this universe. Nothing matches any of our charts, some of the element analyses on the planets are subtly off, and the proportion of non-human sentient races is...beyond our experience." He glanced around, as if checking that he'd left nothing out.

"Wait..." Medea was still struggling through the explanation. "I understand -- I think -- that you didn't start out here. Did you all start out in that other universe? And what were you doing, before you met the Kyrie?"

Apollo straightened, as if making a speech. "In our universe, humans are at war with mechanical beings called Cylons. The Cylons destroyed all but a remnant of our civilisation. The last battlestar, the GALACTICA, commanded by my father, was shepherding a rag-tag fleet, searching for a refuge." He paused for a moment, as if uncertain of how to phrase his next sentence. Jason raised a hand, then let it drop.

"Zareth, and his ship of Kyrie, crossed our path by chance," Apollo went on. "He kidnapped my sister, Athena. Actually, he had us convinced she was dead, but the Greenies came back and told us she was alive, so Jason volunteered the ARGO for a rescue mission, and we left the Fleet. After we

found Starbuck, we tracked down Zareth and got Athena away from him. You know the rest." He looked at her and smiled, pleasantly self-satisfied.

"Oh, yes." Silver whined softly, indicating that following this made his head hurt.

"Right." Apollo smiled more broadly. "Now, tell us about this rebellion of yours. How well organised is it?"

"It's not my rebellion," Medea objected.

"Is it just humans against the lizards, or are there other races involved?" Jason asked. "Other species, I mean? And are you just objecting to being ruled by lizards, or is there some philosophical basis for the war?"

"Philosophical basis? For a war?" Medea's eyes were beginning to glaze.

"I mean," said Jason clearly, "do you disagree with their philosophy of government? Are you monarchists, and they hegemonists? Or perhaps anarchists? Or democrats? Or...?"

Starbuck went back to what was obviously his favourite topic. "Do they need fighter pilots?"

"Of course," Medea replied absently. "Where would rebellions be without a fighter pilot or two?" She paused for a moment, then took a deep breath. "The Minderians have ruled for more years than anyone can count, by reason of might and numbers alone. They take the best, make silly rules, and insist everybody obey them. All peoples despise them, resent them, but most are too set in their ways to actively do anything about it. The free traders -- most of them are humans -- always had a kind of loose confederation, and finally decided to organise. The nominal leader is a man named Royce Landriss. He's a little stiff-necked, and takes himself pretty seriously, but mostly he's pretty reasonable. He's not too much on philosophy, and like most free traders, he's pretty liberal-minded." And it's going to take all his liberal mind to cope with all of you, she thought to herself.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea," Athena asked sweetly, fluttering her eyelashes, "if we set a course now, and talked later?"

"We're agreed, then?" Apollo said. "We'll join these rebels for now?"

The others nodded, and Jason said, "Maybe we can convince them to do something about helping us get this jump drive Medea thinks is so effective."

Apollo looked at Medea. "We'd better start getting the course set in. It may take some time to translate the settings."

Medea followed him numbly. Just like that, she thought. I compress three hundred years of history into four sentences, and they just nod. I think I'm outclassed. The headache she'd been trying to beat back descended.

Looking at the settings made it worse. "I understand those are star systems," she told Apollo. "But what are these markings that say centars? And what are all the numbers marked with little circles? Where are the quad settings?"

"You're not a navigator, either," Starbuck commented, shaking his head. Medea frowned questioningly, and he responded, "We already know you're not a pilot."

"How...?"

"You don't act like one," he answered ingenuously. "Are you just into blowing things up?"

Medea shuddered. I must be slipping, she thought to herself. Or getting really obvious. Aloud, she said, irritation colouring her voice, "I thought we were trying to translate settings."

Starbuck, leaning in a proprietary fashion against a bulkhead, said, "Cy might be able to help. He's real good with numbers."

"What?" Medea said. "Cy?"

There was a clank behind her. She whipped around so quickly her vision blurred, adding a new, sharp pain to her head. A large silver form detached itself from the metal fittings in one corner. Because of the blinking red light in its forehead, she had assumed it was merely a more bizarrely shaped terminal than the ones on either side of it. Now that she could see it was moving under its own power, it was obviously not just a terminal. "What the hell is that?" she yelled, preparing to duck behind Apollo.

"Oh, you haven't met Cy yet," Starbuck said pleasantly, with a definite tinge of pride. He went up and put a hand on the thing's shoulder. "This is Cy. He's a Cylon, one of the mechanical creatures we told you about. The ones we were fighting, back in our universe. Cy, this is Medea."

"I-am-Starbuck's-friend," the mechanical being assured her. "He-revived-me-and-taught-me-about-friendship. And-pyramid." The flat drone of his voice was just sufficiently irritating that she had to repress an urge to start screaming a reply.

"He revived you." She told herself firmly, I will not ask from what. Or even for what. They might tell me. Then I'll be even more confused.

"Cylons-have-superior-minds," Cy announced in a matter-of-fact drone. "I-can-translate-terms." He managed a certain smugness, even through the drone. It turned out to be justified, more or less.

It took well over an hour of close concentration. Her instructions were slightly skewed, true, but Cy persevered, with unflagging mechanical energy, until the instructions were unravelled into something acceptable to the navigation computer (or what she thought was a navigation computer).

By the time they were done, her head was out-throbbing the engines. Medea staggered back into the common room, looking for a soft place to fall. Jason was there, radiating good cheer and a certain alcoholic mellowness. The same aura was even stronger around Silver, who'd evidently shared more than one bottle with Jason.

"Give." Medea held out a hand toward her old friend.

Silver handed the bottle over, and Jason said genially, "There's plenty more," as she drained the contents in two large gulps.

"No," she answered civilly, despite the desire to snarl. "I need a place to sleep. Do I crash in here, or...?" The couch looked uncommonly soft. And its cover was plush fabric. She was starting to sink into it when Jason took her by the elbow.

"There are plenty of beds," he said, and led her, half supporting her, through another door. There was a large bed, circular and inviting, in the centre of the room. It was as good as it looked, Medea discovered, as she rolled onto it. Taking off her clothes would require expending energy.

She hoped Jason wasn't offended.

From somewhere behind her, she heard a deep masculine voice ask, "Do you think your friends will help us?"

Some portion of her mind still hanging on to consciousness identified the voice as Jason's. Muzzily, she murmured, "They should." She felt the corners of her mouth curve in a funny little smile, more smirk than anything else. "Royce owes me a favour or two." If Jason heard her, or said anything else, she didn't know or care. The bed had a whole assortment of lovely, big, fluffy pillows that did wonders for her head.

* * * * *

Eventually, Medea got herself on schedule with the rest of the group. She decided to try approaching them one-on-one, on the theory they'd be less confusing that way.

She actually managed to catch Athena away from Starbuck. The woman was in the common room, sitting on a couch, busily sorting through some kind of picture cubes. She was still wearing the string outfit. It abruptly occurred to Medea that until the journey ended, she herself would be stuck with no change of clothes. But her grey trousers were comfortable, and her blue tunic more serviceable than its fine sheen suggested.

"Athena?" she said in a carefully friendly voice. The woman froze, then shifted her head slightly, so she could observe Medea. Athena's eyes were blue, but wariness now made them icy. Clearly, this was going to be a difficult conversation.

Medea arranged her face in a cheery little smile. "I was wondering if you could help me with a little problem. I only have this one change of clothes with me, you see, so I'll need to clean them somewhere." She found herself standing there silently, braced against that mask-like hostility. She forced her mouth open again. "Is there a laundry facility on the ship? You know, a place to clean clothes?" She was beginning to feel like a total idiot.

From the room beyond, another person pushed open the door and stepped in -- Apollo. The woman on the couch underwent a startling metamorphosis -- all hostility vanished, and she was once again a frivolous, almost doll-like beauty with a vacantly cute expression. "Apollo, Medea's worried about her clothes." Athena gathered up her cubes while she talked. "I think they're really classic, myself. Not that any of us is really clothes-conscious, except Jason." She smiled sweetly, and walked gracefully but quickly out through another door.

Medea's patience frayed easily. "What's the matter with her? Is she some kind of mental defective?"

Apollo winced and sighed deeply. "Your reaction is...understandable." He seemed to find it difficult to talk. "Athena...has some abilities...she doesn't want. They terrify her. Zareth -- the Kyrie who held her -- controlled her. He dressed her the way she is, made her into his pleasure toy." His mouth twisted with the sour taste of the words. "He made her do things with her abilities, or maybe in spite of them." He looked directly at Medea, an appealing frankness on his face. "I don't really know what happened between them, and it's none of my business. If Starbuck's not upset..." He grimaced, then shrugged. "She's not much like the sister I grew up with; I guess she never will be again. But at least she's alive."

He was standing quite close to her, and Medea felt the wave of sadness and regret as strongly as if she'd generated it herself. Instinctively, she took a few steps backward. To cover the awkward silence, she said, "I really did want to know about laundry facilities. For cleaning my clothes."

You must have something." Shells! Why am I babbling? Athena must be contagious.

There were perfectly good laundry facilities, a nifty little unit right next to the entrance to the shower. There was, in fact, one in every bedroom, including hers. Apollo slid back a decorative wall hanging to reveal a closet -- filled with clothes for someone Jason's size. Since Medea was a normal-sized Kyrie, she'd have drowned in them. He pulled out a robe and demonstrated the workings of the clothes-cleaner.

After the demonstration, Apollo asked, "Are you sure you understand how it works?" He looked at her meaningfully, as if he expected her to strip and try it right then. She gave him one of her better "fat chance, buster" smiles, thanked him politely, and went back into the common room.

Unfortunately, as she discovered when she began talking to Jason over a glass of wine (didn't the man ever stop drinking?), something she'd done had evidently impressed Apollo -- favourably. Only a few minutes into her discussion with Jason, who was very artfully trying to redirect the conversation to Medea's personal life, Apollo joined them. And ignored Jason's polite hints to leave.

Silver viewed the whole thing with ill-concealed amusement. Medea would have been more thrilled with the situation if she'd been sure it was her irresistible charm that was attracting him, and not just the fact that she was the only unattached female around.

As an escape, she began an exploration of the various doors set into the curved wall of the central common room. The second one opened on a supply room. Medea quickly changed objectives, checking to see if there were a few more of those mines that had proven so useful -- and so impressively effective -- in blowing up the station. She discovered a whole new box marked "High Explosives," filled with little square boxes that hummed gently when opened.

"Oh, frak! Don't play with those!"

Medea jumped about a foot and whirled around, almost dropping the box she was holding. "Where the...? How did you...?" she sputtered, looking at Starbuck, who stood not two feet away. Her ability to sense other beings' auras must be screwed up -- maybe something about the ship?

"Are you trying to blow us all up?" he asked gently, taking the box from her and putting it away.

"I'm a demolitions expert," Medea replied indignantly. "When I want to blow you up, you'll know it, believe me." She paused for a moment. "How the hell do you manage to keep sneaking up on me?"

He gave her a little-boyish grin. "I don't sneak," he said innocently.

"And, while I'm at it, why are you wearing a Kyrie outfit?" She was determined not to be distracted.

"Oh, this," he said, absently fingering the fine material. "Athena had me wear it so I could fake out the automatic ship sensors when we escaped from the Kyrie ship. Are you a telepath, too?" His gaze was too transparently innocent to be real.

"Well," Medea hedged, "I have normal Kyrie powers."

Starbuck regarded her soberly, his jaw tightening. He suddenly seemed very dangerous indeed, and Medea realised her back was pressed against the shelves behind her. She wasn't sure when she'd backed up.

"Then you can take over other people's minds," he said in a harsh voice. "Force them to do things they don't want to do."

"Now, look," Medea protested weakly, "whatever Zareth could do -- and I'm not sure I believe everything you all keep telling me -- normal Kyrie don't...don't..." She shuddered at the thought.

Starbuck still looked wary, but relaxed a little. "You figured out I'm a psi-null by now," he said conversationally. "That means if you try to pull any funny stuff, like on my wife, I won't be affected. I could still damage you before you could stop me."

"Why would I want to try anything on your wife?" she asked in honest bewilderment, feeling as if she'd missed half the conversation.

"She's still scared of what Zareth had her doing." Starbuck flung the words over his shoulder as he left, obviously feeling he'd warned her sufficiently.

Lovely, she thought. She found a corner and crawled into it, propping herself against the supply room wall and bracing her feet against the end of the shelving unit.

Zareth. The exploration ship. It had been a long time ago, before the Kyrie decided the Minderians were an endurable nuisance, and they didn't really want to go into space much any more. Back when the birth of a new Kyrie wasn't a rare event, a cause for celebration.

They had a full crew complement, balanced between Kyrie and Wolvern. The records said Zareth was handsome, strong, charismatic, a leader who commanded special devotion. Their charter was to look for a new home-world. It wouldn't be the first time the Kyrie moved; Kyrie history stretched back over three different planets, into a past a millennium ago -- a long-ago past, before the Wolvern bond-mates, when they allowed their strong emotions to rule them, and when, in the sway of those emotions, they destroyed. In at least one legend, they left a home-world in cinders because of their raging emotions.

She shivered, and thought about what she could remember of stories about the death of a bond-mate. Few of her people allowed themselves to live after a partner's death. Those who did committed themselves to an enclave where they could be treated -- sedated, really -- to avoid any effects that would hurt others. It was not something easy to think of. Not having the empathic partner, allowing those psionic portions of the mind to control, enduring the unchecked swing of emotions...

Medea found herself shuddering uncontrollably. Then Silver swung around the edge of the shelving unit and dropped down in front of her.

He placed a paw on her arm. Sister? You are troubled?

She leaned forward and buried her face in the rough fur on the top of his head. They have told me of bad Kyrie, Kyrie who lost their bond-mates.

Silver growled in reaction. Such would go crazy!

I think they did worse. She rubbed her cheek against the warm fur and sat quietly, thinking, absorbing the peace that Silver's empathy brought. She had told Starbuck the truth. Her level of power was normal, no more or less than any other Kyrie with normal training. Her mind-link with Silver, common to all her people and their Wolvern companions; the ability to alter a human's perceptions of her appearance; placing mild compulsions not directly contrary to a person's own ethics; the ability to sense the auras of other beings before she actually saw them; a kind of deep-rooted privacy barrier that she could erect around her own thoughts if she wanted to keep a



secret from Silver -- that was the full catalogue of her psionic abilities.

Starbuck's statement finally penetrated. He was a psi-null. Of course he constantly surprised her -- she couldn't sense his aura. He didn't have one. He was probably damped to most of her powers, except maybe the appearance illusion. And with the information she now had, it became obvious why Athena had been actively avoiding her. She suddenly remembered that Athena had seen through her illusion before she dropped it. If Athena had some native empathic ability, that might explain Zareth's interest -- he could well have been searching for another bond-mate.

There was no point in forcing any confrontation. They would reach the base soon, and all this would become academic. She patted Silver and moved back. "It's been different," she said to him in short-talk. "But I think I'll be glad to see the last of this ship and everyone on it."

* * * * *

It took a week to reach the base. That was about four days more than Medea was prepared for. By that time, she'd passed "think I'll be glad" and was actively anticipating seeing the last of the ship. It was with a sense of great relief that she looked at the viewscreen in the control room and saw a familiar system.

"It's the big blue one," she said, pointing over Apollo's shoulder. "The fourth moon."

"It's almost as big as a planet," Starbuck commented brightly.

"Good strategic thinking," Apollo said. "Having a gas giant that close must throw off enemy readings."

"And ours," Medea commented thoughtfully. "I hope you can pilot this thing by the seat of your pants, because we don't have the equipment to pick up the homing beacon."

"Oh, sure," Starbuck replied. "We do that all the time."

"I should have guessed," Medea murmured, shaking her head.

"Hey, it looks like it's all water!" Starbuck exclaimed as he engaged the landing retros a few moments later.

"It is all water," Medea answered with a touch of impatience. "Why do you think we need a homing beacon? Put us in orbit."

"But where do we go if there's no dry land?" Starbuck threw her a look from wide blue eyes.

"We wait up here 'til we get an escort," she told them. "Someone should be along in a few seconds. We'll follow them down to the drydock. It's the only way to find it without a beacon to bring us in."

"Azure Base to unknown vehicle," a voice she didn't know said from the com. "Identify yourself."

Medea looked at the board, trying to disguise her surprise. Azure Base? It had an impressive sound, all right. She turned to Starbuck. "I give up. Which switch opens the com?"

"Oh, here." He flipped one.

"Hi, there," Medea said brightly, watching Apollo's face out of the corner of her eye. He looked properly shocked by her flippancy. "This is Medea L'alet. I'm aboard the...uh..."

"ARGO," Starbuck stage-whispered.

"...ARGO," Medea continued. "We don't have a beacon pick-up. Could you send an escort for us, please?" She tried to conceal just how much she looked forward to leaving this ship.

There was a pause, then a voice she knew quite well snapped, "Registry and point of origin." Medea glared at the speaker for a moment, inwardly damning Royce to choice torments for delaying her escape from the ship.

"He doesn't sound very friendly," Starbuck commented, watching her with a calculating look.

"Royce," Medea replied into the com, forcing her voice to remain even, "I'll make a full report once I'm down. Now, send that escort, dammit!"

Royce's tones were so crisp, the speaker fairly hissed. "It had better be a full report, if you expect to explain this breach of regulations. Your escort is on the way."

What freighter's on his tail? Medea hoped disaster hadn't struck while she was gone. Something had clearly frayed Royce's temper.

Two slender, conventionally-shaped fighters appeared a few moments later. To her bemusement, Starbuck and Apollo matched the fighters' speed precisely, and effortlessly guided their ship to a landing on the artificial drydock that appeared in their path. They made a better landing than Dell Clery usually made with a beacon.

The movable roofing sections closed over them, and the lighting phased to compensate as the dock slowly dropped toward the ocean floor.

Starbuck promptly shattered his image of competence. "Hey, lookit!" he said inelegantly. "We're being swallowed!"

"That's one way of looking at it," Medea agreed. "It's a little unusual, but I suppose it does seem that way." Maybe I've been around them too long. They're beginning to make sense.

Apollo frowned. "It could be difficult to get out of here quickly," he commented, one hand rubbing his chin.

"Messy, maybe," Medea said confidently, "but not difficult. A smuggler designed this place. Above each ship's berth is a built-in bolt hole. If somebody leaves that way, you get a ton of water on the floor, until the doors seal again." She shook her head, remembering the night a drunken rebel had decided to double-check the escape system.

There was a clank as the dock reached bottom, and the front section opened up into the larger bay area. On the viewscreen, they could see a delegation forming in the bay in front of them. Royce strode through, the crowd parting before him. Close behind Royce was a tall, distinguished man. As they stopped at the front edge of the crowd, Royce turned to confer with the other man. Royce's short auburn hair looked rumpled beside the other's carefully coiled neat coiffure.

Medea stiffened in repulsion, then relaxed. That explained Royce's peculiar behaviour. With that hair-do, the man had to be one of the "pure-bred humanists," perhaps even a leader of that nut cult. Royce was trying to impress the lunatic, in a misguided attempt to gain more allies. She

smiled in evil anticipation; wait'll this crew come out!

"What happens now?" Starbuck asked.

Apollo followed by announcing, "I put down the landing ramp." Both men looked at Medea.

"After we all come out," she said brightly, "the automatics move the ship into a berth."

Apollo shook his head gravely. "It's your world," he said, "and your rebellion. You go make your report."

"You really want me to go out there and face Royce by myself?" she asked weakly.

"I didn't get to be a captain without learning to recognise an irate commander," Apollo said firmly. "We're not budging until we're sure he's not going to shoot us on sight."

Medea suddenly believed he really was a captain. She growled inarticulately and stomped off through the common room, neatly snagging Silver from his position at the bar. "Come on," she snapped. "I'm not going out there by myself."

Silver woofed plaintively, but it didn't translate into anything more than, "Why me?" He lurched a little, but she was too determined to care.

The lock opened in front of her, without her doing anything. "Thanks a lot," she snarled at the intercom.

Halfway down the ramp, Silver lost his balance. Medea barely managed to disentangle herself as he rolled down the ramp and stopped at the cultist's feet. She brought one hand to her mouth to cover her smile, then converted it to a deliberately sloppy salute. Royce returned her salute, precisely, but wordlessly.

"Medea L'alet reporting," she drawled, with just a suggestion of insolence. "I blew up the power station as ordered, sir." She noted smugly that Royce lost a little of his stiffness at her words.

"So we heard, L'alet," her commander replied formally. "Seven days ago. Report your whereabouts for those seven days."

Oh, he's going to be sticky? Medea thought in annoyance. This cultist better be supplying lots of men, or, better yet, money. "I've been on this ship, sir," she replied in her best imitation of a military monotone. "Clery left us. The people on this ship gave us a ride here."

She could see she'd scored another point, but he was still keeping up appearances. "What port of origin?" he asked, pointing with his sharply cleft chin toward the ship.

Medea tried to think if anyone had ever mentioned that. "That's a difficult question," she shrugged, then, before Royce turned too red, added, "sir. I'm not familiar with any of the names they gave me."

"What registry is she?" Royce demanded, slowly and dangerously, his eyes glinting like blue diamonds above his flaming cheeks.

"I don't think it's registered," she replied, enjoying his irritation. "It was a part of a 'rag-tag fleet.'"

"That's a bad joke!" Royce snapped.

"It's a quote!" Medea snapped right back. She made a definite effort and stifled the chuckle rising in her throat.

"Mede, damn it! Stop playing games!" Royce roared. "Tell me who they are and where they're from!"

Medea grinned wickedly at the auburn-haired man. "You aren't going to like this," she said honestly. "But it's all true, Royce. There's five of them -- if you don't count something they call the Greenies. Mostly, they're human, but they're not from around here. Shenna knows they're not from around here. Where they come from..." She paused for dramatic effect. "...there's no jump drive."

"What?" Royce looked appropriately stunned. "How do they get anywhere?"

"Very slowly," she replied. "Why do you think it took me seven days to get here?" The range of expressions that flitted over Royce's face satisfied some inner craving that Medea hadn't known she'd had -- someone else was just as vastly confused as she was. "It gets better," she added in a burst of maliciousness. "Wait 'til you meet them." She turned to look back up the ramp. "Okay, group, come on out!"

First down the ramp was Apollo, his insignia shining brightly in the artificial light. He'd added some decorations since Medea'd last seen him, and over his shoulders wore a dark brown cape. He marched to the bottom of the ramp, snapped to attention with military precision, and said smartly, "Captain Apollo, recently of the battlestar GALACTICA, Blue Squadron."

Royce gave a brief nod in acknowledgement. "Royce Landriss, Commander-in-Chief of the United Forces for Freedom from the Minderian Tyranny."

United Forces? Commander-in-Chief? Wow, Medea thought to herself, I wonder when this group stopped being just "the rebels"?

There was a light cough, and they all turned to see Jason starting down the ramp. He'd changed for the occasion, too. Now, he had on green velvet pants, thigh-high black boots, and a green silk shirt with gold lacing up the front. He ambled down the ramp, waving genially at the astonished assemblage, and stepped up beside Apollo. "I'm Jason," he announced, as if that explained everything. "The ARGO's my ship."

"His skin is brown!" Some young subaltern in the back row voiced what everyone was thinking, undoubtedly earning himself a later reprimand. The expression on the face of the cultist reminded Medea of nothing so much as the look Jason's face had held when he first saw Silver.

Royce gulped. "Not from around here..."

"Told you," Medea smirked. "You're beginning to understand. And there's more."

Everyone looked up the ramp again. Starbuck and Athena made a joint appearance, which was unfair to Starbuck. They hadn't changed. Starbuck cut a strikingly handsome figure in his Kyrie clothes; Medea had to admit they suited him. Athena was as unclothed as ever.

"Your mouth is open," Medea said nastily to Royce. So was every other male's, actually, including the cultist's. He had an approving gleam in his eyes. "She's married," Medea announced loudly. "The hefty guy with her is her husband. Meet Starbuck and Athena."

Apollo corrected her immediately. "Lieutenant Starbuck, also of Blue Squadron. And Athena was an ensign." He sounded less positive about his sister's status.

Royce fixed him with an impatient glare. "Just what organisation was this 'Blue Squadron' part of?"

Apollo met his gaze evenly. "It was one of the Viper squadrons of the battlestar GALACTICA, guarding all that was left of the human race, fleeing the Cylon tyranny."

"In case you're wondering what a Cylon is," Medea interrupted, brightly forestalling Royce's demand for explanation, "the next one down the ramp should be one, unless, of course, the Greenies come out of the cargo hold."

"They never do that," Athena said sweetly.

There was another short pause, while all the males in the area breathed deeply. I wish I could do that, Medea thought enviously. Even my best illusions don't provoke such...attention.

A clank, thump, clank announced Cy's descent of the ramp.

"It's a robot!" The cultist gaped openly. "It's a working model! Just like in the designs!"

Through the awed silence, another voice could be heard clearly, from the back of the crowd. "Great Mother of Gazhenda! Is that a ship?" Medea stiffened, and stretched to see. The crowd parted sufficiently to let through a lanky man, casually dressed, with corn-yellow hair falling in a hank loosely clasped behind his head.

"Well, well." Medea smiled with false sweetness. "My ride that left me to the lizards."

The man pushed back his tousled hair and grinned weakly. "I see you made it okay, Medea. Sorry I had to take off in such a hurry, but you know how it is -- the fortunes of war."

"It helps if you don't hurry the fortunes of war along." Her grey eyes flashed dangerously.

"What's Silver doing down there?" The blond man ingenuously attempted to redirect her attention.

"He's drunk! And don't try to change the subject!"

"Dell left when he did at my command," Royce cut in brusquely. "There are things you don't know yet."

"Why is it," Medea said acidly, "that every time I almost get killed, somebody says, 'there are things you don't know'?"

"That's not important now," Royce announced. "We may lose the whole rebellion in the next few days. Everything depends upon finding a way to get sufficient explosives into the weapons factory on Sondar to destroy it before the new star disruptors are delivered to the Minderian troops."

"It wasn't a rumour, then," Medea said weakly. "Royce, do you know how many explosives you'd need to blow up that whole factory?" She paused in thought. "At least a shipload, probably two. And that port is well-guarded. You couldn't fly in there with any ship even suspected of rebel connections. They'll be sure to have the latest registry records."

"Registry," Royce echoed slowly, his eyes rising to study the bulbous shape of the ARGO. "I... No, we couldn't..."

Starbuck picked up the idea immediately. "We could do it," he volunteered. "We're not a known ship; they won't have any reason to stop us. If you fixed us up with this jump drive..."

"The ARGO won't hold enough explosives," Medea interrupted swiftly, attempting to head him off.

"How big is the factory you're trying to blow up?" Apollo asked Royce.

"Three hundred acres," he replied, producing an exchange of blank looks and shrugs between Starbuck and Apollo.

Medea took pity on them. "It's about three times the size of the power station I blew up back on Mindar," she explained. "You know how much it took to blow..." Suddenly, her eyes met Starbuck's; he was grinning openly. Very quietly, she said, "How much more powerful are those 'high explosives' than the ones you lent me for the power station job?"

"Five times, maybe six," Starbuck replied casually. "What d'you think, Apollo?"

"The cited ratio is 5.3 to 1 for the tylium-derivative explosives," he answered cautiously.

"There are others?" Medea asked in awe. "More powerful?" Boy, L'alet, when you put your foot in it...

Royce was nothing if not a practical man. "They have explosives that can do the job?" he asked Medea.

"Well, yes," she gulped, a horrible premonition crawling along her nerves. "But they don't have jump drive," she reminded him. "They couldn't get there in time."

"You could install one," Starbuck inserted helpfully. "As a kind of payment for our blowing up this factory for you. We'll do the whole thing, plant the explosives, and everything."

"Under Medea's direction," Apollo added hastily. He sounded as if he were trying to reassure someone; she wasn't sure whether it was Royce or himself.

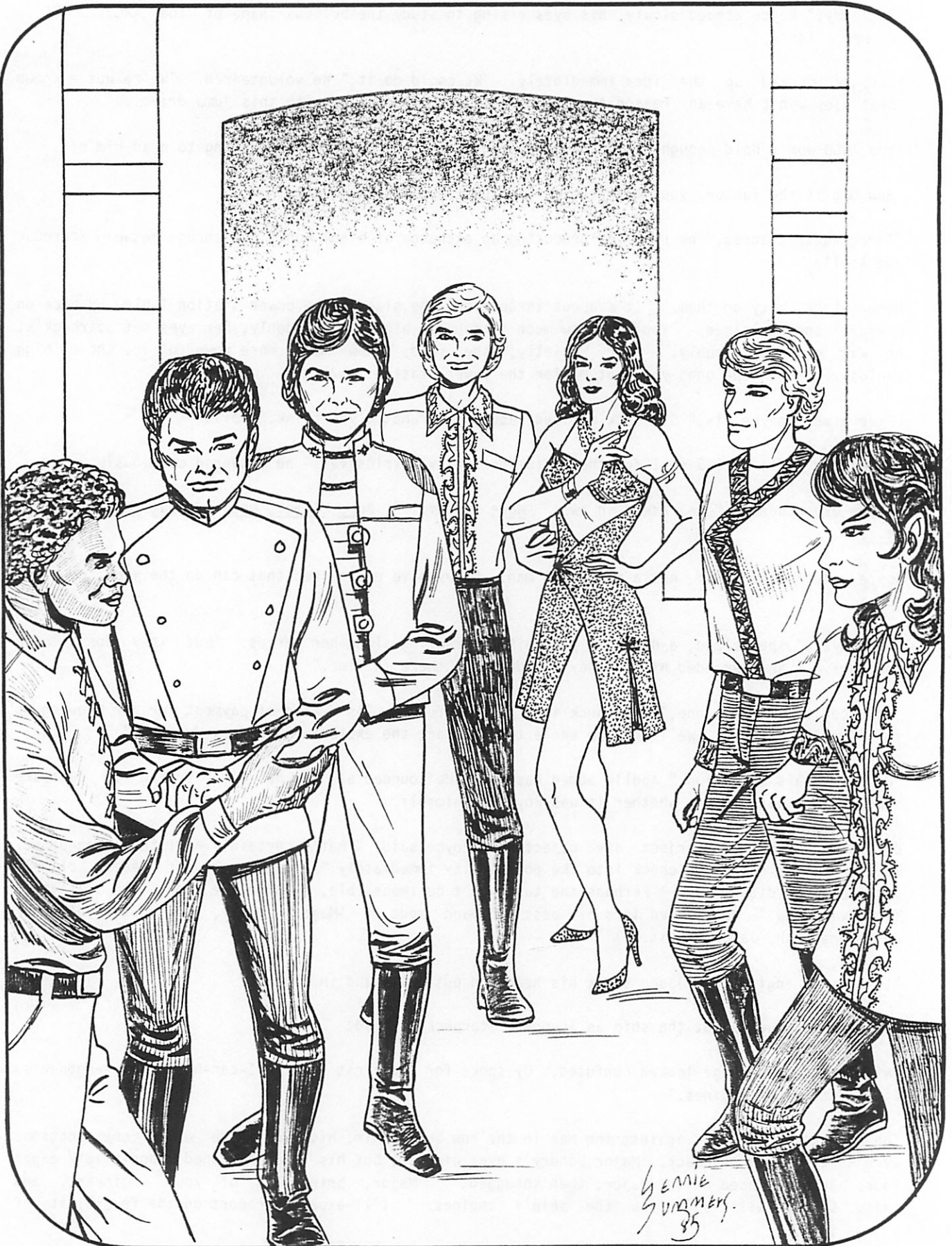
Before she could interject any objections, Royce said, "That's certainly an interesting offer. We'll have our engineers check into the possibility immediately." He looked at Medea, clearly enjoying her discomfort. "Perhaps the task won't be impossible, even in the short time available. You never know." He shifted into his best command mode. "Major Landry, bring two of your engineers. Ah, Jason, is it...?"

"I'm not an engineer." Jason shook his head and put up a hand in protest.

"Cy knows as much about the ship as anyone," Starbuck offered.

While the assemblage looked confused, Cy spoke for the first time. "I-can-help-their-engineers. I-understand-the-engines."

The cultist jerked back against the men in the row behind him, his eyes wide with consternation. Even Royce was taken aback. Major Landry's eyes widened, but his face developed a positively eager look. Royce glanced at the Major, then shrugged. "Major, bring two of your engineers, and this...Cylon...will show you the ship's engines. I'll expect a report on the feasibility of



installing jump drive in her within the hour." He turned toward Medea. "Mede, why don't you escort these people to the Officers' Lounge for some refreshment?"

"Why the hell not?" she replied ungraciously. She turned and stalked off toward the corridor leading from the landing bay, leaving the others to follow as they wanted. She didn't even look to see if anyone brought Silver along.

* * * * *

By the time they reached the Lounge, Medea had relented enough to introduce the group to the bartender. Ordering a round of drinks produced some minor problems. A request for "Caprican brandy" got translated into "Konin" with a minimum of difficulty; "ambrosia" was a somewhat harder order to fill.

Medea had no exact idea where Silver was, save that he was nearby, but obviously not in the Lounge. The link they shared had a distance limit, so the fact that she could sense him gave her some information. The fuzziness she sensed told her something more -- Silver wasn't just drunk; he was blitzed! She headed for a couch facing Starbuck, Apollo right behind her.

"Hey, Mede, wait up!" The call caused Apollo to stop and turn, and Starbuck and Jason to look up. Medea ignored it, and settled herself comfortably on the couch.

Dell Clery dropped down beside her. "Mede," he said in a tone clearly meant to be ingratiating, "it really hurt me, having to leave you back on Mindar. You know I would've come back as soon as I could." He put a warm hand on her shoulder, and blinked his big, blue eyes at her.

Medea shoved the hand away and snapped, "Not as much as it almost hurt me!" She'd had enough of his insincere apologies.

"Mede, if we weren't such good friends, I'd take that as a cutting remark."

She glared coldly. "Friends? Sure, buddy. Anybody who leaves me stranded -- not once, but twice -- is no friend of mine."

"Medea, is this character bothering you?" Apollo asked softly. Dell jerked his head up, his body braced for a fight, and met Apollo's gaze. The rebel held that pose tautly for a long moment, then clearly had second thoughts. He shrugged petulantly, said, "If that's how you want it Mede," and got off the couch.

"He was a friend, once." Medea gazed at her drink, not seeing it. "He helped me get jobs, introduced me to people. We had some good times together."

Apollo, who'd joined her on the couch, expressed an immediate sympathy. "Friendship can be a difficult thing to judge. Attractive qualities aren't as important, in the long run, as knowing you can count on someone to defend your back." He glanced meaningfully at Starbuck.

"Yeah," Medea said shortly.

Royce came in, creating a stir at the entrance to the Lounge; he still had the cultist in tow. He acknowledged comments from the few people scattered around the spacious room, then headed straight for Medea.

A few feet from the group, he stopped. "Captain Apollo, Lieutenant Starbuck, Medea L'alet, Ensign Athena, Citizen Jason, may I present Textor Franken." He gestured to the man beside him.

Apollo and Starbuck both rose, demonstrating their ingrained politeness. Medea raised an eyebrow. Athena breathed deeply. Textor Franken smiled warmly at Athena, and favoured the others with a nod.

"The Textor is always interested in meeting humans," Royce said smoothly. "He welcomes the opportunity to discuss the theories his people hold about the origins of all life." The Textor clearly hoped to hold his discussion with Athena, but somehow, Royce arranged him on another couch with Apollo. This left Royce free to move into the seat next to Medea. "Mede, I should be angry with you," he began in a conspiratorial tone.

"Oh, really?"

"You didn't do my image any good out there in the landing bay," he said, a smile on his lips, but with residual anger in his eyes.

"Your image?" Medea tilted her head. "Ah, yes, the 'Commander-in-Chief.' When did all that happen? And when did you become such good friends with 'pure-bred' humans?"

Royce looked gratifyingly uncomfortable. "Now, Mede, you know we need allies. You can't fight a war without people and supplies. You especially can't without money." He grimaced. "Whether I agree with the man's philosophy or not, he's willing to help us."

"At what price?" Medea demanded sharply, her voice rising. Royce put up a hand to quiet her, but she ignored it. "In exchange for my hide?"

"Now, Mede..."

Apollo interrupted. "We'll keep you perfectly safe, Medea." He was standing at her elbow. The Textor was gingerly perched on the couch next to Athena and Starbuck. Medea looked back at Apollo, surprised. He gave her a warm smile and said, "Can I get you another drink?"

"We have waiters!" Royce snapped; but Medea surrendered her glass, and Apollo marched off toward the bar. Royce said, very low, "Mede, we have to talk," and when she started to answer, took her arm and added, "Not here. Somewhere where we won't be interrupted."

Medea glanced at the other couches. The cultist was becoming positively animated. Athena was developing an unfocussed glaze, and Starbuck had an oddly absorbed look. Jason had gone somewhere else. A quick survey of the room found him at another couch, with a shapely blonde female in uniform. Royce tugged at her elbow. She couldn't think of any reason not to go.

She let Royce lead her out the back entrance and down the corridor beyond. To her surprise, he led her into the small base chapel.

"This is an odd place for a command briefing, Royce."

"That's not what I want to talk to you about."

"But that's what I want to talk to you about," she objected. "I have a few complaints."

Before she could start listing them, Royce silenced her with a warm kiss. His arms were strong, and his lips were gentle, but insistent, evoking memories she wished she didn't have. Firmly, she pushed him back. "I thought we'd settled this. I thought you understood it's impossible."

"I haven't proposed again," he countered, but he had that gleam in his eyes she knew all too well.

"There's no point to this," she said wearily. "Our racial differences aren't going to change, no matter how much either of us may want them to. I can't marry you."

His jaw muscles tightened, and a dangerous red began to creep up his cheeks. "What if something happened to Silver?" he asked coldly. "Would you still be bound by this ridiculous bonding?"

She felt the blood drain from her face. Very softly, she replied, "I'd go crazy, Royce. Literally. Don't ever say anything like that again." She shuddered uncontrollably.

"Come off it, Mede! Don't exaggerate! I've let you get away with a lot, but things are changing now" His eyes shone with a fervour she hadn't seen before. "We're going to win. We're going to change the way things are done in this galaxy." He stepped back, a clenched fist coming up for emphasis. "This will be a human galaxy, and the lizards will have to pay the tribute. It's our destiny!"

"And what happens to the rest of us?" Medea asked sickly. "To me? To Silver?"

His guilty start sent her stomach churning. "What did you do to him?" she whispered in terror.

"Wait! Mede..." He reached for her, but she was moving too fast for him. It had suddenly occurred to her that she'd left Silver totally unprotected.

As she thought more about what could be happening to the Wolvern, her pace increased, until she was practically running down the hall. What was she going to do if her suspicions were true? Dell could be expected to vanish the moment things got rough. This was Royce's base; most of these "United Forces" were loyal troops following his commands. She was much too far from any Kyrie to contact them by conventional means, let alone psionic ones. "Goddess, what have I done?" she moaned aloud as she rounded a corner, her thoughts whirling in panic.

She had a sudden close-up view of Apollo's horrified face, then they were entangled on the floor. Her back was wet, and something sharp was pressing into her side. She rolled free, and in the same moment realised that the sharp object was Apollo's laser. He sat up as well, and quipped, "I was bringing your drink, honest..."

"Apollo, you've got to help me! Silver's in danger! I don't know what they've done to him! Lend me that laser, please!" She was shocked to hear herself sliding into hysteria.

He regarded her gravely. "Starbuck and I left Silver snoring quietly in the front entrance of this complex."

"Goddess grant he's still there!" Medea gasped, pulling herself together with an effort. "I've made a terrible mistake."

"These people aren't as noble as you thought they were?" he asked calmly, as he helped her to her feet.

"How...?"

"I overheard an interesting conversation while I was out trying to find you a drink," he explained. He stopped at the door to the Officers' Lounge, and kept her from entering by putting an arm across the portal. "Did you realise that the Sondar mission was planned as a suicide trip? A diversion to let Royce's people attack the main base of the Hierarchy? I gather they intended to 'leak' news

of our coming, so the troops would be concentrated there, waiting for us. It's an excellent strategy, actually," he added calmly, but a muscle in his cheek was twitching.

Medea felt nauseous. "I didn't know," she whispered.

He continued relentlessly, ignoring her admission. "I've set things like this up myself. When you're facing a ruthless enemy, you have to do unpleasant things." His eyes bored into hers. "There's just one difference. I never involved civilians, or sent people out to die without letting them know the odds. You're part of this. Starbuck and I... We're Warriors -- we've taken long chances before. But Jason? And my sister?"

Medea shook her head helplessly. "I didn't know," she repeated. "I thought...they wanted freedom, a chance for people to do whatever they really wanted, without all those stupid rules and unfair taxes and..." She stopped because she wanted to cry, and that wasn't much use in this situation. "Royce wants me. If he can't have me, I guess he wants me dead," she said slowly, working it out. "He wants power more than I thought. I'm Kyrie; without Silver, I'd go crazy. I don't know whether he really believes that or not. I've got to get out of here." She raised her eyes to his, panic threatening to overwhelm her again.

"No," Apollo said softly. "We have to get out of here. You're not alone any longer."

Medea nearly had heart failure when the door opened abruptly. "I thought I heard your voices." It was Starbuck.

"Oh," she gasped, "I wish you wouldn't do that!"

"Do what?" Apollo asked, totally confused.

"She doesn't hear me coming," Starbuck said helpfully. Apollo shook his head doubtfully, and Starbuck continued, "Are you two ready to leave? Athena and Jason are dragging Silver back to the ship right now."

Medea realised her mouth was hanging open. She'd barely gotten it shut when Apollo asked, "Did you overhear something, too? Or did my lovely sister unleash one of her talents?"

"Both," Starbuck answered.

Medea glanced down the corridor, sensing a sudden increase in human life forms approaching. Faintly, she could hear the sound of footsteps, marching in synchronisation. Starbuck and Apollo exchanged a worried glance, then Medea felt her elbow gripped, and was unceremoniously pushed through the door.

Apollo dragged her through the room, ignoring the startled looks of the people there. She heard a sizzling sound behind them, and looked back to see Starbuck, laser in hand, turning to join them. The sensor lock on the door was now white-hot slag.

Ahead of them, a young sergeant whose name she'd forgotten pulled a gun and started forward to block their way. Apollo fired, and the young sergeant collapsed in agony. Apollo accelerated them into a dead run.

They cleared the entrance and went plunging out into the corridor leading to the landing bay. Medea concentrated on keeping up; she had the feeling that if she fell, Apollo would drag her along without stopping.

Abruptly, he stopped, and she slammed to a halt beside him. He gestured mutely at the metal doors before them, now solidly shut.

"Frak!" Starbuck breathed in her ear. She repressed the instinctive jump.

"Is there any way around them?" Apollo asked curtly.

"No," Medea drawled, "but I might be able to make a way through." She rummaged around in the pouch at her waist.

"You're carrying explosives?" Apollo's voice sounded strained.

"Would you go out without your gun?" she asked rhetorically, rapidly calculating stress factors, height and weight, the rated potential of her "little darlings." Yes, two of these ought to do it. She smiled confidently at the two men. "Let's move," she said. "I've got to get close enough to plant these."

"Those pebbly little things don't have detonators," Starbuck said, staring at what she clutched.

"I'm the explosives expert. Trust me."

"Do we have a choice?" Apollo looked over her head at Starbuck, who shrugged and grinned.

With the two men providing covering fire, Medea raced to the doors, neatly tucked one of the "little darlings" at the centre and one about three inches to the right. Then she bolted back to the corner of the guardpost Apollo and Starbuck were hiding behind. "Hit the floor!" she said briskly, suiting action to words, as she mentally sent the heat impulse that spectacularly detonated the bombs.

With the door hanging drunkenly from its hinges on the right side, they had no trouble exiting. A few stragglers tried to stop them, but her protectors dispatched them neatly. Medea hesitated on the far side of the door. She gave a speculative look overhead at the roof, still supporting the ocean overhead. Then she pitched a handful of "little darlings" through the opening.

Halfway up the ARGO's ramp, she detonated them. The eruption of noise stunned even her. "Overkill, definitely," she muttered. "You're losing your touch, L'alet."

They went up the ramp, with Starbuck playing rearguard and backing up, but nobody came out to object. As soon as the airlock closed, Medea felt the tremor of the engines' start-up. Apollo and Starbuck raced past her, through the common room to the control room.

She decided a slight detour to the bar would be reasonable. She couldn't pilot; why make herself unnecessarily nervous? They'd either make it, or they wouldn't. The bolt holes couldn't be plugged, so they'd probably get off-planet. The danger was the fleet in orbit. Hopefully, that explosion had drowned Royce as well as his base. A vindictive Kyrie? Who, me? she thought. No, it's only just retribution.

She stumbled over an unmoving lump of fur in front of the bar. Silver had obviously slept through the whole incident, but Medea didn't know whether to be angry or amused. She was too caught up in a wave of utter relief, and too glad just to be close to him again, to really be angry with him. She settled for amusement, and stepped over him to get a drink.

There was a sudden pressure, which forced her to her knees in the lush carpet. It seemed to last a second or two longer than she remembered from the time before; that must be the effect of breaking

through the seal on the bolt hole. Then the pressure was gone, and she resumed her walk to the bar.

She'd just collected a drink when the ship made an abrupt sideways lurch, quickly followed by another, jerking the opposite way. Avoidance manoeuvres, which meant someone had alerted the fleet. She swallowed the portion of her drink that was still in the glass, then made her way back to the control room, stepping over her prostrate bond-mate on the way. Occasionally, she was forced to cling to the back of a couch, or to the wall, as the ship made an especially vicious lurch.

In the control room, Apollo and Starbuck were frantically working over their controls, their hands a blur of motion on their boards. Cy was standing beside Starbuck, swaying gently with each sideways motion of the ship.

"I don't suppose they got the jump drive installed before we left," Medea said wistfully.

"They-had-just-begun-to-understand-a-micron," Cy answered. Medea gave him a sharp look, almost sure she'd heard a sarcastic undertone in his metallic voice.

"Look out for the guy on your left!" Starbuck yelled at Apollo.

"I see him," the Captain retorted. "As well as the one on the right, and those two ahead of-us. We need a hole -- now!" He sounded worried.

Medea clutched a handy terminal, closed her eyes, and prayed, even though the Goddess hadn't been exceptionally kind lately. Maybe the Goddess would forgive utter stupidity, if she promised not to do it again.

"You can open your eyes now," Apollo said, almost gently.

She opened them -- to see both men lounging back in their chairs. The control board and viewscreen were shimmering with an odd blue haze, completely obscuring any outside vision.

"We've been hit?" she asked fearfully. "It's all over?"

"It's over, all right," Starbuck said cheerfully. "And you could say we're safe. I didn't like that universe much, anyway."

A sudden awful suspicion flooded over her, and she stared at the shimmering control board. It was starting to fade a bit, she noted, shocked.

That shock didn't last long. "What!?!" she roared, making Apollo jump. "You mean... We aren't... The ship..." She paused for a moment. "Oh! oh, no... This is how you switch...uh..." She stopped again, fumbling for words.

"That's it," Starbuck said, flashing her his most ingenuous smile. "Maybe this will be a nice universe."

"I don't know," Medea said, staring at the now-clearing viewscreen. "Something tells me we just found ourselves another whole set of problems."



"WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ...?"

H. Ravenwood



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"Why Did It Have To Be...?"

(By H. Ravenwood)

When a landing party from the battlestar OSIRIS was sent to the surface of the planet Byzel for an in-depth exploration, the Colonials began from the very beginning to encounter disasters -- brief disappearances, accidental death, theft... Captain Diana, the party's military commander, found herself beginning to doubt her own sanity.

Her doubts increased when she saw her missing wing-mate and closest friend, Lieutenant Morgan, suddenly appear before her from out of nowhere -- then just as suddenly vanish again. He was lost somewhere in the vast desert surrounding the old city they were exploring -- alone, unarmed...and apparently being followed by some sort of huge serpent.

Snakes, basts, and insects were everywhere. When the red moons of Byzel -- the "World Where All Things Speak" -- moved into conjunction, the event was greeted by a wild and unnerving chorus from the survivors of the once-powerful beings who had inhabited the planet; two nights of primal madness followed. Diana searched for the missing Morgan; his trail led to the ruins of a massive, incredibly old amphitheatre, where all traces of him disappeared.

Sentilogist 1/C Tanis, the scientific head of the expedition, insisted on exploring the vast ruin. While his colleagues excavated a dome in the centre of the old city, he went out into the desert. Separated from his companions, he encountered his own greatest fear, in the form of a magnificent gigantic snake. But the creature never touched him; it vanished when two Warriors came to the cowering sentilogist's rescue.

Back in the Colonial camp, Diana learned that Sergeant Minerva had been the victim of an attempted murder; the body of Lieutenant Freya's beloved sentiological bast Elidor was found and removed from the debris of a minor cave-in; an exploration party sent to map the labyrinth beneath the city made their way through the dark underground corridors under the watchful eyes of a myriad of busy little arachnids; and Captain Oisin arrived from the OSIRIS to take over camp security.

When he learned of Tanis's encounter with the snake, Oisin promptly ordered everyone back to the camp; Cultural Survey Tech Shari was sent to notify Sentilogist Renet, Tanis's arch-rival, of the recall. But when she entered his work-place, she found a clutter of objects that had no business being there

-- artifacts, tiles, panels from wall murals, stolen from all over the site.

The woman confronted Renet, who tried to shrug the matter off. When she refused to accept his explanation, he drew a weapon, took careful aim, and pressed the trigger...

Part XI-A

Renet lay on his bunk, his eyes closed and one forearm draped across his face. His rapid breathing had calmed; he might have been napping for centars.

It was so easy... He marvelled at how simple it had been to pull the trigger, and at how calm he now felt. It was one thing to shove a Warrior off a ledge -- an impersonal act against a near-stranger; but this was a face-to-face affair involving someone he'd known and worked with for yahrens. There had been shock on her pretty young face, then she'd collapsed...

How easy to remove a nuisance! And to think I was afraid of my own reaction! Tanis will be even easier to deal with. All I have to do is find the right time, the proper circumstances...

"Renet!"

He blinked, startled from his thoughts, and jumped almost guiltily from his prone position. "What is it?"

"I didn't mean to startle you, but we've been looking everywhere for you. Have you been here long?" The man's uncertainty hid no ulterior motives; there was nothing to fear from him.

"A short while," he said evasively. "What is the difficulty?"

"Uh, Captain Oisin, the Security Chief, called everybody in for the day. We didn't realize you were in your bunk. Shari might still be looking for you. I guess we should call her back, too."

"Yes, certainly, if the good Captain has a reason for his summons. What does he want with us? We are civilians, after all..."

The youth shrugged. "Who knows? The military types never tell us anything until they absolutely have to. In the meantime, we all have to check in with Security, then gather for whatever announcement the Captain wants to make."

"I will be there shortly. Thank you for calling me."

With a nod, the young man was on his way.

So, Oisin is behind all this. I might have expected as much. He has the sense of a house daggit. But they can't have found the woman; she is well enough hidden. So whatever the man is concerned with, it cannot involve me...

Renet calmly and quickly combed his hair with his fingers and rearranged his tunic before leaving his cubicle to join his fellow Colonials.

* * * * *

Gaius frowned at his instruments. Oisin had ordered him back before he could make certain vital observations, but from the evidence he and his assistant had already gathered from their meteorological equipment, there was indeed a major storm heading their way. The front had slowed, but was building in intensity; the winds would hit like an atmospheric tidal wave. He wondered if it would be possible to make the leaders of their expedition understand how dangerous the storm could be. He trusted Diana to listen to him. But Tanis seemed utterly oblivious to the weather's effect on human personnel, and might disregard his warning, and Oisin was a total unknown; he'd never had to deal with the Security officer before, and the man had no idea of the violence of Byzel's weather.

But there was a tremendous storm approaching, temporarily stalled between the old city of Byzel and the ancient sea. I must be allowed to monitor it further. Without adequate warning, it could devastate the camp, and perhaps even kill. Even with warning, that great grand-daddy of a storm could hit them in a few days and damage the work of sections, further ruining a city that had withstood millennia of destructive weather, sandstorms interspersed with small breezes and blazing sun. Few of those storms could have been as violent as this one looks to be...

Perhaps the planet is telling us our time here is done...

* * * * *

With an exaggerated motion, Gregory flipped a card from the deck in his hand and sent it flying neatly across the table to land atop one of several small piles of cards.

"How long are you going to keep dealing those without starting up a game?" Alexandra asked, leaning on the back of his chair and peering over his shoulder.

"Until we know whether we're going back to work today, or if it's safe to start a game without Oisin interrupting," he replied amiably. His opinion of the Security Captain was similar to that of many Warriors aboard the OSIRIS -- weary dislike tempered by occasional disgust.

"Ummm." She didn't seem inclined to argue the point.

A vagrant gust of air caught the door from the hands of two entering personnel, slamming it noisily into the wall before one of them caught it, cursing.

Diana dropped into a chair while Talos pushed the metal door shut behind them. The rush of air relieved the oppressive stillness of the shelter for a micron, but with the air circulation units operating at less than half-capacity, the heat was almost immediately as bad as before. The two officers found themselves the focus of half-hearted attention.

"We're done for the day," Diana said briefly.

No one cheered the freedom from several centars of hard work in the outdoors. Aside from playing cards and sleeping, there wasn't much to do in the little free time the expedition members had.

"So Oisin gets to run around and play investigator," Freya grumbled. "I suppose we'll have to pull more security duty at the watch points?"

"No. We're not Security personnel, so we're confined to quarters with the civilians until he's had a chance to look the camp over."

"Confined to quarters?" the other woman shrieked. "Who does he think he is?" An answering chorus of groans echoed her words.

"A Security officer doing his job!" the Captain snapped sharply. "For tonight, anyway. Besides, we've got more people missing."

"Who is it this time? Tanis wander off again?" Gregory called from his post at the table.

Diana shook her head. "One of the Cultural Survey techs -- Shari. Sept sent her looking for someone, who later turned up in camp; she never came back. And the labyrinth mapping party hasn't checked in since mid-day. They don't answer a communicator summons, but their emergency beeper hasn't gone off, either."

The Lieutenant snorted. "Oisin should have fun with that!"

"It's not funny. Disappearing personnel have been the worst problem of this expedition. But since we'll be here until dinner at the earliest, we might as well all find something to do." Diana disappeared into her private cubicle, closing the door firmly behind her.

"Is that a pyramid game I see arranged on the table?" Talos asked after a moment, his startlingly blue eyes sweeping over the half-dozen Warriors in the room.

"It could be," Alexandra suggested, nudging her wing-mate's shoulder.

"Might as well be," the dark young man responded. "Anybody care to play?"

Everybody decided they might as well.

"What about our missing people?" one of the women asked. "Isn't Oisin going to do anything about them?"

"If they haven't checked in by morning, the good Captain is sending out a Security team to look for them."

"Oh, great!"

"But that's a long time to wait. Something could have happened to them..."

"Then again, it could be just another minor equipment failure. You know how common those have been around the camp," Talos told them. "At any rate, if anyone wants to make a fool of himself, he's quite free to do so -- but don't be surprised if Captain Oisin has you arrested for obstructing his duty and disobeying his orders!"

* * * * *

Tanis glared at the fiery red setting sun. Small swirls of dust eddied around the walls, carried by the usual evening breezes, and a fine coating of grit began to settle over everything. The sentiologist watched the lengthening shadows for several centons before stalking back to his cubicle. Everyone else in the shelter wisely kept silent until he slammed his door.

Damn that Oisin to Hades! Who does he think he is, high-handedly stopping our work on his whim? Somehow, his difficulties with Diana seemed altogether trivial compared with this man's interference. Of common sense, he truly believed Oisin had none. Of arrogance and pompousness, he had twice the normal human allotment.

And Christopher sent the likes of him down here, to a sensitive site? Now, when we're so close to what could be major discoveries of vital significance, not just for this planet, but for us as well? It's not fair! It's really not fair...!

But griping about it would serve no useful purpose. With determination, the sentiologist yanked his notebook and a sheaf of loose pages from under his pillow, throwing himself across the bunk in the process.

The miniatures of the Map Room, the Dome of Srolt, the Amphitheatre in the desert, and the lesser sites in the city -- the Morning Sun Tower, the Snake Pit, the Gap Gully, the base camp, the ridge they'd selected for a landing site, and numerous others -- were all pencilled in on his private maps, included in his personal computations. He poured over those maps, hoping to find solace in mental deliberations while he was forced to rest. Rest, hah...!

The Dome and the Amphitheatre held his attention.

The Dome was the site illuminated by the Guardian's beam in the Map Room, and was undoubtedly a place of great importance. What secrets are hidden under the drifting sands of that small valley? Could there be treasures, archives, or religious artifacts under that silent rounded stone? Or has it, like so many other valuable sites on so many distant worlds, been vandalized through the ages, its contents rifled to put a few coins in some thief's pocket?

He ached to know, to see into its darkness with the light of his scientific art, to bring Byzel back to life again by bringing its past into the present for all to see. Lords, let it be untouched, undamaged! Let my hands be the first to touch whatever artifacts, whatever history that dome might hold...

But there was also the Amphitheatre -- far out in the desert, unmarked on the Map Room floor, a huge monument to whatever species had lived and built on this world. What was its purpose? A silent, brooding pile of stone, sheltered from the winds, almost unmarked by the eons it must have seen... Strange images carved on its columns and high walls; broad, terraced steps -- or seats that could hold thousands of beings, if those beings were anything to our scale -- but who knows what people built it, or for what reason? He felt more strongly drawn to it every time he thought of its lonely grandeur. A temple, a monument, a place of entertainment...?

And what creatures might still live near it, thriving -- or perhaps just barely clinging to life in the dry sands? He shuddered. There lay his only difficulty with Byzel. Snakes...

He could deal with the insects, the lizards, the bast-like creatures that seemed to delight in stalking the humans -- they were simple, comprehensible nuisances, when he thought of them at all. The dry-world plants -- the snrubs, rock mosses, and hardy grasses -- weren't so very different from similar vegetation he'd encountered on comparable planets or in regions of similar climate. And the hot, arid climate itself was tolerable, something he'd adapted to in a matter of days. The Warriors assigned to the survey parties were basically hard-working individuals he could stand to have around, who seldom interfered in his work, and who were enthusiastic in their own pursuits.

But the snakes...

While others might be able to overlook the presence of the multi-hued, many-sized, ever-present

slithering creatures, he could not. They gave him the shudders. To think of them was to wish to be somewhere else -- anywhere else! He had an instinctive distrust of the snakes, and was sure it was well-founded. To disregard them would be a grave mistake...

If there were even larger snakes out in the desert, he would wait until he had more personnel and adequate equipment before making another trip to the Amphitheatre. That means, he concluded with satisfaction, that tomorrow's main thrust must be uncovering the Dome, and finding some way into it without damaging the precious handiwork of ages past...

* * * * *

"We're lost," Thoth stated flatly.

"How can that be?" Corvus demanded. "We've been mapping as we go, marking every junction of the corridors, every identifying bit of colour on these forsaken round walls!"

"For some reason, our comp-banks haven't been storing the data we've been putting in them," the Warrior reminded him. "It's been erasing as fast as we put it in."

The other tech grumbled something under his breath.

"Your equipment's not working any better," Thoth reminded him.

"More bad news," Persephone advised them. "Our communications devices are dead, too. Something about this maze..."

"Because we're so far underground?"

She shook her head. "That shouldn't do it. Unless there's something in the stone that inhibits our circuits..."

"We should still be able to find our way out," Thoth insisted. "After all, there's still the spider webs we had to break through to get this far."

His fellow Warrior stared back the way they'd come, while the civilians looked more hopeful. "I wouldn't count on it," she breathed. "Those creatures look pretty busy. And if the weavers of the webs we saw earlier are just as active, they've probably repaired the damage already."

The four Colonials peered at the rounded passage, already festooned with sticky streamers as several small, dark, multi-legged creatures swung across the open space, leaving fine threads fastened to the walls behind them, and forming a web of pallid grey. Tiny eyes blinked and flashed momentarily in the light of the lanterns. Beyond those small pools of light, there was only the Stygian darkness, cool and timeless, stretching away into infinity.

"Like I said," Thoth repeated, "we're lost."

* * * * *

Renet scanned the chamber with hooded eyes, giving the appearance of a man already half-asleep. His companions accepted it, and left him in peace; even the group listening to the musician's strumming in the corner kept their voices low when she invited them to sing along.

The sentiologist considered his day. His secret cache of tiles was safe; the girl who'd discovered them would never speak of it to anyone -- her lips were mute, buried beneath the sand. He felt no

remorse. She had become an obstacle to his own glory, which he had found necessary to remove.

Sergeant Minerva left him more uneasy. He'd shoved her over the edge of the gully in the eerie moonlight of that first wild night, but she'd been found and brought back, still alive. She didn't seem to have said anything to anyone about how she came to be in the gully. Perhaps she hadn't seen him at all -- he'd tried to be stealthy when following her. But she was out of his reach now, and if she had any idea it was him, he couldn't silence her...

If, now, I can find a way to deal with Tanis, quietly and safely, I will be able to take my proper place as head of this expedition, and as leader of the Cultural Survey team. Fornax, after all, is nearly senile, and head in little more than name, and now that he is practically crippled...

But how to deal with his rival?

An opportunity will come. Tanis has a reputation for lucky scrapes, and sooner or later his luck must run out. All I need to do is be there when it happens, to assure the proper results, or perhaps to aid in the arising of a deadly situation...

And then there was Ashur. The epigraphist was still mumbling over his work, but was close-mouthed about its potential, only shaking his head at any questions. I will have to continue to watch. An opportunity will surely arise there as well...

He swatted at some stinging insect that had found its way into the shelter, and decided to retire.

* * * * *

The sun had set; only faint traces of red still lit the horizon, staining the sand the colour of blood. Among the dry, rolling dunes overlooking the city, a giant snake reared angrily, hissing as it studied the camp, communicating its rage to the man standing beside it.

Morgan winced as the blast of emotion swept into his mind; it was almost more than he could bear. Some of the OSIRIS crew had limited psionic abilities, although most of them didn't know it and probably wouldn't believe him if he told them. It was fortunate; an aware telepath in the camp would have "heard" the ancient creature's thoughts, and would have reacted with terror. He himself, after days with the Byzellian serpents, almost cringed from this master of the race.

Your people are murderers! Sentients -- killing their own kind! We feared this from the beginning, when we sensed your arrival.

We did not come here to contaminate your society...

The gleaming serpent was silent, swaying slightly as its attention returned to the human camp. Above them, the stars twinkled into view, and the moons rose high in the cloudless Byzellian night. The wind had died away, and utter stillness settled over the desert.

You would have us permit such entities to exist here?

Think of the innocents... Morgan understood the creature's outrage and protective instinct; their world had existed for so long...

And now, the acts of man, especially that one... They could wipe us out with a thought, if they willed...

* * * * *

Alexandra stirred in her sleep, a silent alarm ringing in her head. She sat up in the darkness of her cubicle. "What...?"

Something fluttered madly through the air; she felt it settle on her hand for the briefest of microns before it threw itself away from her again. "Thorn?"

The small flying serpent flashed bright gold in a crack of light from the door, but no coherent sensations came to her -- only terror. Something had driven her little friend into hysteria.

"What's wrong?" She tried to calm herself, but Thorn's feelings were contagious; she felt a shiver of fear run down her spine.

Don't be ridiculous. There's nothing wrong. Nothing can hurt us here; there are Security men all over the camp, and shelters all around this building... Thorn had been uneasy about Byzel from the beginning, fascinated by it, but refusing to wander far from her or the others. What does he sense now?

The little winged creature dove back at her, trying to bury itself between the bunk and the wall, burrowing against the pillow. In a blind panic, Alexandra reacted similarly, curling up on the thin mattress, and pulling a blanket over herself in spite of the heat.

* * * * *

Diana couldn't sleep. Eventually giving up, she left the darkness of her cubicle and found a seat in the central room. The others had all retired, and she was alone with her thoughts -- memories of Morgan, concern for Minerva's survival, some anger at both Oisin and Tanis. Then a sudden, inexplicable icy shiver ran down her back, and she fought back a moment's urge to flee.

What in the name of Kobol brought that on? she wondered a centon later, when the feeling had passed, leaving her shaky and in a cold sweat. This planet, again. It's doing something to me, making me doubt my own sanity, making me think I'm seeing things, spooking me. And I don't spook... She'd told Morgan that, during the first few days on this Hades of a planet, before he'd vanished into the desert, followed by an unknown enemy...

No, not followed. Following...

She sat bolt upright in the uncomfortable chair, staring at the wall. Where did that thought come from?

But it's the truth!

And she knew it was. Somehow, she knew it. Morgan had gone away of his own free will, following something...

But does it matter why he went? Without food, water, compass, directions, weapons, what chance does he have in that desert? What chance does he have of still being alive?

A noise scattered her thoughts, sent them flying a hundred ways. One of the cubicle doors rasped open, and a man stepped through it -- a tall, silver-blond Warrior with a worried expression on his long face.

"Hello, Talos!" she called in a whisper, suddenly glad of a friend's company.



MEA
CULPA



He started, catching his breath as his hand dropped to his laser. Then he relaxed. "Diana!" He crossed the room. "What's going on out here?"

She was puzzled. "Nothing I know of. Why?"

He shook his head. "Something..." Quick, silent steps carried him to the door. It creaked as he pulled it open, and he mouthed a curse at the sound.

Light from the moons and stars streamed in. Diana rose to join him as he stared out at the night.

"Nothing. So what woke me?" he muttered to himself.

The chill returned. "I...felt something," she told him. "It was just a chill, a micron, as if we were in some danger..."

"That's it," he told her flatly. "That's what it was. But there's nothing out there..."

"Maybe that's it?" Diana drew her own weapon. "Should we investigate?" She spoke in the same low whisper he used.

A laugh startled them both, and they ducked back into the shadows behind the door. Two Security men passed, apparently undisturbed by anything, enjoying some private joke. The Warriors watched them walk by.

Then Captain Talos stepped out. "You men!" he called.

They jumped, turning to face him. "Yes, sir?" they responded in unison.

"Anything happening out there?"

They glanced at one another, shaking their heads. "Everything's been quiet for centars, Captain," one of them told him.

Talos nodded and turned away. The Security men watched curiously for a moment, then shrugged and returned to their duty rounds.

"Nothing," he repeated to Diana a moment later. His voice was grim, but puzzled. "And nobody else seems disturbed. So what in Hades was it?"

She shook her head. "Nerves, maybe?"

"I don't buy that. Whatever has let us survive this long in the Military wouldn't let us down now. Something's wrong."

She was surprised at his insistence, but relieved, too, that it wasn't just in her head. "What do you suggest?"

"Feel up to a little reconnaissance?"

"Might as well. I can't sleep anyway."

Their quiet search of the camp took over three centars. They went over the base camp and its immediate area, checking in with all the guard posts. As Captain Diana was the military head of the expedition, no one questioned their right to be out in the night.

But they found nothing.

Some time after midnight, they returned to their shelter, feet aching, and fears unsatisfied. "Talos," Diana said before they retired to their separate chambers, "I want a meeting tomorrow. I want to find out what's going on here. Just military personnel, a few we can trust -- not Oisin, Lords forbid! You, me, Hannibal -- and a military representative from each survey team, to provide information and opinions. You can collect them while I finish my daily report to Commander Christopher and talk to Security. Some place where we won't be observed, and can't be overheard."

"Is it wise, lady, to be playing at secrets, under the circumstances?" He didn't ask if it was necessary. He knew.

"We've played at being sentiologists long enough. We're still military personnel, and I think we're going to have to deal with something on this planet before too much longer. I want to be prepared, whatever it is. And I don't care if the others think I'm paranoid, or that I've lost my mind..."

"We know you better than that," he told her. "Morning Sun Tower, whenever you're ready. Seems Hannibal's been checking on Oisin's duty roster -- rather surreptitiously, I might add. Dymos and Ryan have the watch there all morning, and they're in my squadron as well as Security. We can trust them to keep their mouths shut -- and their eyes open."

* * * * *

The bloated crimson sun rose on a preternaturally calm day. The group that gathered at the Srolt site after breakfast was unusually quiet and somber. Despite the extended rest period provided by an enforced afternoon off duty, few of the Colonials seemed truly refreshed or excited. With no wind to move the air, the demon sun was already turning the unshaded valley into a furnace.

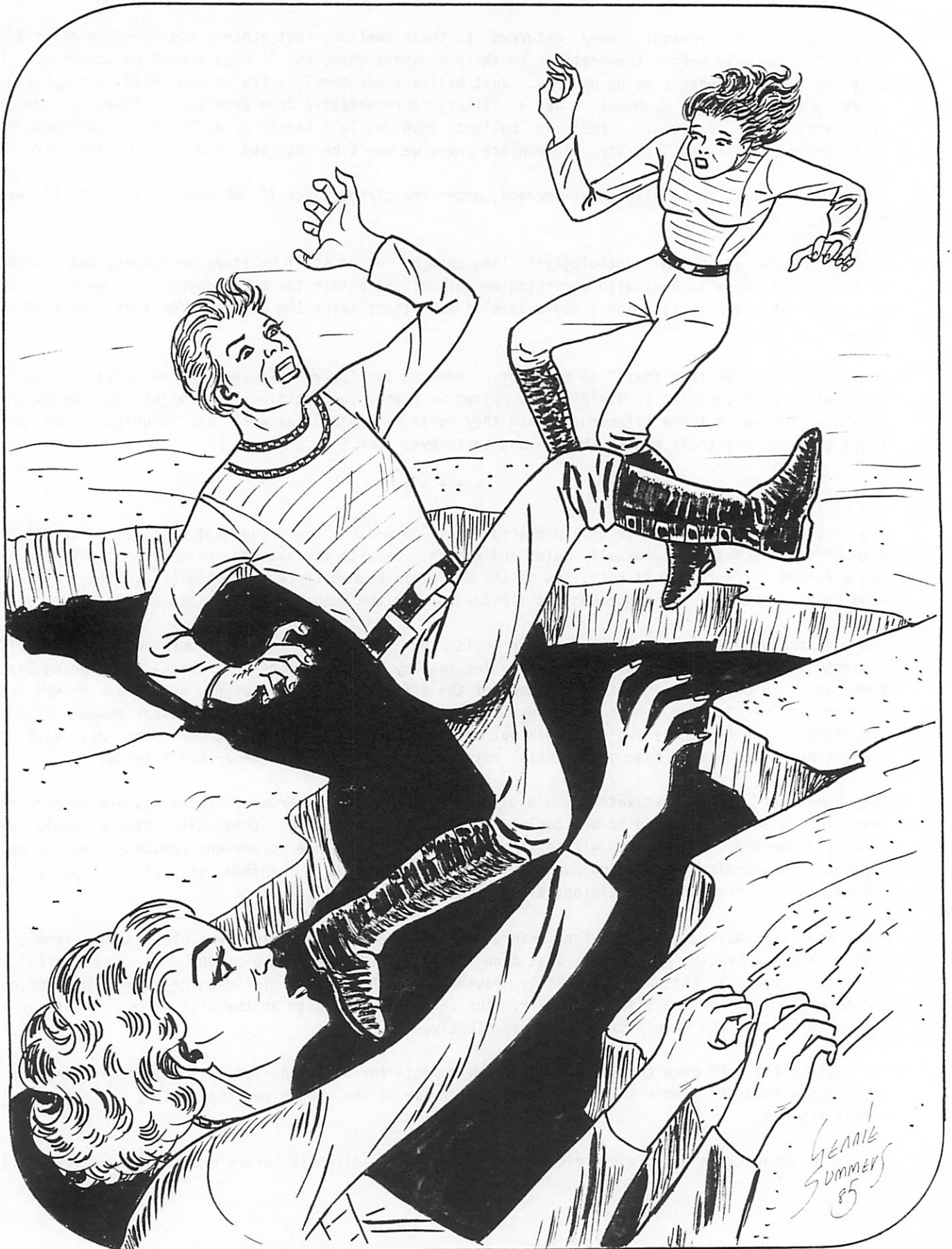
The Warriors and civilians picked up their tools and listlessly went to work on Tanis's pet project. The sentiologist had been called away by Lupus for "one last check-up," leaving Sept temporarily in charge. No mention was made of the dirt-slide the day before, which had seemed so amusing at first, but which had resulted in the death of one of the lesser members of the expedition. The topic was avoided, both out of deference for the bast's owner -- who was working among them -- and out of fear of potential retribution from that Warrior or her friends.

The dome was to be excavated by mid-day. Those were Tanis's orders. There was new urgency in every job -- some things had to be completed before the approaching storm hit; others would be carefully marked, then covered with a sand/foam bonding substance to prevent damage during the bad weather. The chemical insulation could be removed later with a minimum of effort, and would prevent further erosion of sentiological materials.

Under Sept's prodding, it wasn't long before the collapsed soil and sand were cleared away from the trench, and new bracing installed. What then lay open to the ruddy light was a beautifully mortared, smoothly fitted, exquisitely rounded dome. More careful digging around the ancient stones opened much of one side to the air. The senior sentiologist at the site dropped into the trench to examine the dome's structure more closely.

The rest of the work crew thankfully took a few moments for a rest period, leaning against shovels, or dropping into the meagre shade of the opposite side of the trench and the jutting chimney that marked its end.

A thin fracture line ran along a piece of mortar, arching slightly before dropping toward the sand



and vanishing. It seemed the sole mark of the yahrens the place had known.

Sept studied that crack for a moment before stepping closer to the dome. He ran careful hands over the smooth stone surface, admiring the architectural artistry that characterized the site's remains. A fine silvery powder came off on his hands; it seemed to have gilded the surface at one time.

"Any metallurgists among us?" he called, studying the gleam on his fingers. "I'd like to know what this stuff is before anyone else gets exposed to it." It might be valuable and was probably harmless to them; on the other hand, the substance might be dangerous, perhaps even poisonous. Perhaps he shouldn't be handling it at all!

One of the conscripted diggers, a Planet Survey tech named Hefestis, joined him in the carefully buttressed trench, staring carefully at the older man's hands and at the glittery powder remaining on the exposed portions of the dome. He reached out to touch a bit of sand-scoured stone.

The sand that had weighed down on the dome for so long had weakened it; the Colonials' digging had taken a further toll. The weight of two men directly on the region of the crack strained it dangerously, and the slight pressure of the tech's hands finished nature's wearing process. Stone and dirt fell away beneath the two Colonials, dropping them into a suddenly yawning pit.

There was a wild scramble for solid ground as shifting sand and stone gave way beneath the unsuspecting humans, and an ominous silvery cloud rose up to blind them, obscuring both the way to safety and the way to Hades.

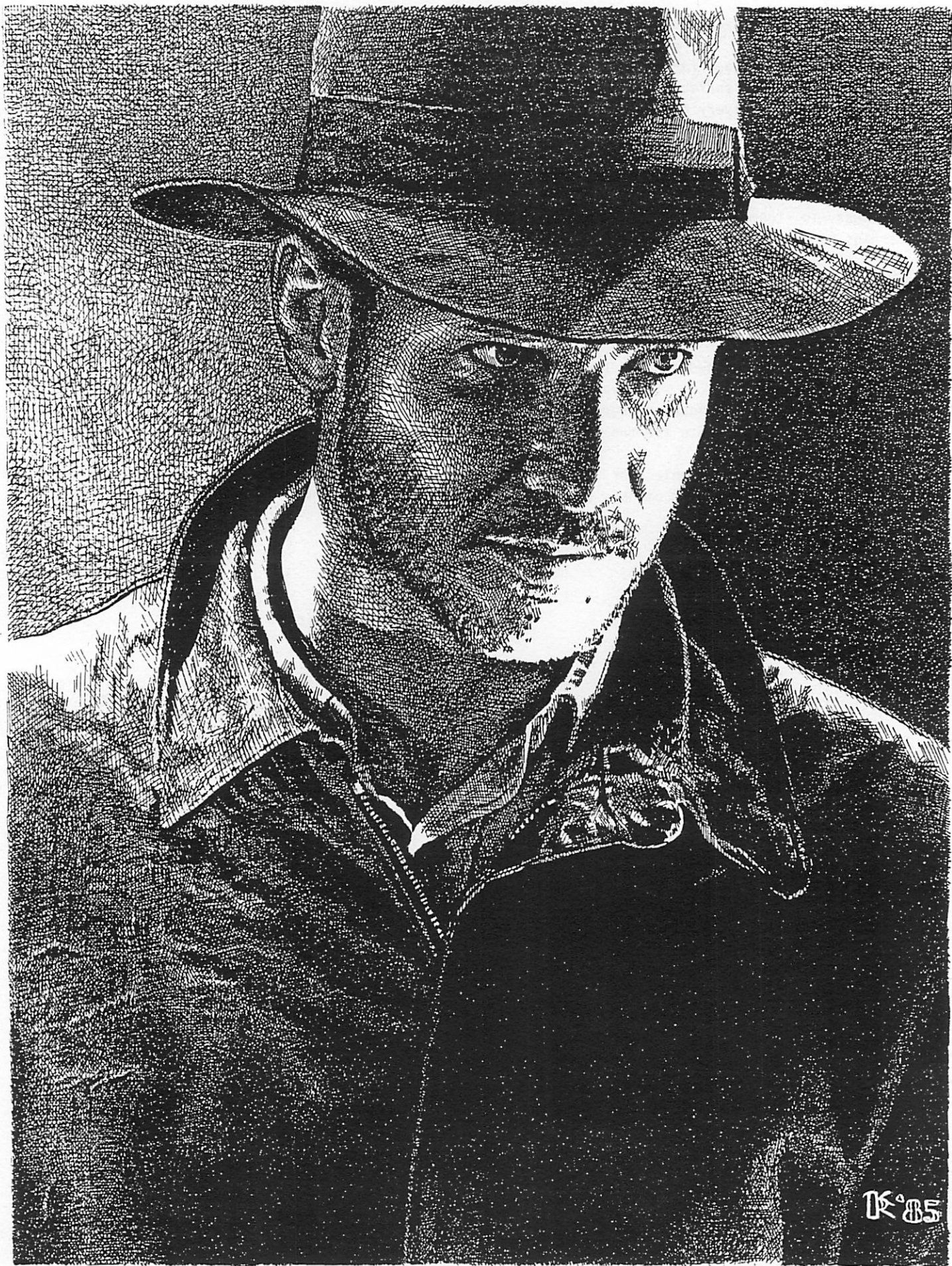
(To be continued.)

IT'S A GIRL!

Congratulations to SHARON and LARRY MONROE, two of our favourite people, on the birth of their first child, BRIGID MARI MONROE, on 20 December 1984 at 10:04 P.M. in the Fairview-Riverside Hospital, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

BRIGID weighed in at 6 pounds, 14½ ounces, and was 20" long at birth. She's a lot bigger now.

The littlest MONROE joins Mom and Dad in what is described as an increasingly fannish home, already equipped with computer, video-recorder, and aquarium. She will get the requisite cat as soon as she can chase one.



Little Sister



by Paul Gordon

"Little Sister"

(By Paul Gordon)

Starbuck watched in amusement as a group of young cadets filed out of the simulator room. Then he sauntered up to the podium where Apollo, too, stood grinning over one particular cadet's observations on Viper performance.

"She keeps trying, doesn't she?" the blond Warrior remarked.

His friend glanced at him, barely restraining a chuckle. "You have to allow for cadets. Even a kid who grew up around Vipers and Warriors is going to miss a few of the finer points. Magdala's learning. She'll be as good a pilot as her brother, when she grows up."

"She looks grown up enough to me," Starbuck replied mischievously. There was a sly undertone to his words the other man somehow missed.

"She's barely seventeen," Apollo admonished with a shrug and another grin. "I thought you liked them older and more experienced." With that, he checked his chronometer, grabbed a stack of papers, and headed out the door, waving airily to Starbuck and Jolly as he left.

"I don't think Apollo realized it was him you were digging at," Jolly commented with an exaggerated leer. "If that girl gets any more obvious in her interest, he's gonna find her in his...room some night."

"I doubt she'd go that far -- at least, not without an invitation," Starbuck laughed. "But I do know for a fact that only yesterday, Magdala was explaining that very same question she asked today to a fellow cadet -- and I think she knew more about it than I do!"

"What else would you expect from Monk's little sister? She's been hanging around the squadron almost as long as he was a part of it. And I think she's wanted to take his place ever since he was killed at Carillon."

"Yeah," Starbuck replied in a softer voice. "Too bad about Monk. He was a fun guy; everybody liked him. And we all liked his little sister, too, no matter how much we teased her then. I don't think it's occurred to Apollo yet that's she's grown up a bit since then."

"It will!" Jolly assured him. "She's not the quitting type. Omega won't like it, though. I noticed him waiting for her outside when class was dismissed."

"He's sure noticed she's grown up! And he's known her a lot longer than we have. I think their fathers were friends or something yahrens ago. But speaking of meeting somebody, I gotta go. See ya later, buddy!"

"Cassie, or Athena?" Jolly shouted after him. Starbuck only grinned, leaving him to consider the vagaries of life for all of two microns before he decided the young cadet's love life was none of his concern -- even if it might involve his commanding officer.

* * * * *

Cadet Magdala waited with bated breath, fingers surreptitiously crossed at her sides as Captain Apollo read off squadron assignments.

Not that she had any doubts as to where she belonged. Her brother had been in Blue Squadron, and the vivacious young redhead had sworn to herself that she would be one of them, even before the Destruction. Now, her dream was finally coming true. Apollo would take her in his squadron; he had to. He'd been a friend of Monk's; they'd worked side by side, and respected each other. And she was sure her friend, Flight Officer Omega, had put in a good word for her; she'd let him know her assignment preference.

Besides, Captain Apollo loved her.

Oh, he'd never said so, not in so many words; but he'd always treated her a little differently from the others during training -- always been accessible to her, always had a special smile, a few words of encouragement. He'd paid her extra attention, shown that he cared in lots of little ways. He couldn't tell her during training, of course. He was a captain, the training instructor; she was a cadet. It wouldn't have been proper for them to see each other, and Apollo was very much a proper officer.

But now, she would be in his squadron, and they could start a relationship in earnest, for she knew she loved her late brother's flight commander as much as he loved her. Now, we can be together...

"...Cadet Janaka, assigned to Red Squadron..."

The boy standing at attention next to her yelped in pleasure; he had a close friend in that squadron. Apollo paused briefly, trying to look properly offended at the small breach of military procedure. Magdala swore to conduct herself with more decorum when her assignment was announced. She wouldn't embarrass Apollo with either look or sound.

"...Cadet Magdala, to Blue Squadron..."

She drew a quick breath as relief rushed through her taut body. She hadn't realized she was so tense and anxious about the assignment until now, when the question was settled. I'm in Blue Squadron! Her eyes gleamed, and she tried to stand even straighter as Apollo finished the flight assignments for the rest of her class-mates.

Elation still sang through her a few moments later when the class was dismissed. They had a few centars before they were required to report to pilots' quarters for bunk assignments. Omega was waiting for her, although her father had been too busy to attend this small ceremony. With a gay laugh, she threw herself into his arms with an abandon shared only with her closest, dearest friends.

Omega was thoroughly pleased to find himself embracing the tall, slender girl. He thought she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever known; he even adored the light dusting of freckles across her small, straight nose. "You seem quite pleased with your assignment," he commented, returning her smile. He never noticed the averted eyes and knowing, carefully concealed smiles of people making their way around them, or he would have been embarrassed at such behaviour in public. But



then, Omega didn't notice a lot of things when Magdala was around.

"Blue Squadron!" she returned ecstatically, tossing back her thick mane of shoulder-length hair. "The very best in the Fleet, and I'm one of them!"

"Hey, all our squadrons are the best!" he laughed.

"The best of the best, then!" she pronounced, carefree.

"Glad you're happy about it. Got a little time to celebrate? Before I lose you to an entire squadron?" he teased.

She giggled. "Officers' Club. Let's go!" Today, everything was going her way. She'd tell her father later. He'd be so pleased...

* * * * *

"But, Father, I'm in Blue Squadron!" she repeated meekly. Magdala's happiness had dissipated at her father's obvious displeasure. "That was Monk's squadron. I thought..."

Matthan turned his glowering face back to his daughter. "You knew quite well I didn't want you in the Service at all! I don't care if you're in Monk's squadron. He died there, in Captain Apollo's squad." There was no compromise with his dark anger.

She took a step back. Her father was still a strong and powerfully-built man, and he'd been so different since the loss of his wife and other children in the Destruction, and since Monk's death at Carillon... He'd never struck her -- that, she could remember -- but there were moments now when she was afraid of him.

"Father," she entreated, "please try to understand. Please try to accept and be happy..."

"Why?" he demanded starkly. "Should I be happy that my only surviving child has chosen Warrior's suicide, serving with Captain Apollo?"

"Don't talk that way about him! And it's not suicide! It's necessary! We need Warriors; the Fleet needs defenders! I'm one of them now, and I'm in the best group there is..."

His icy stare never wavered.

Heartbreak and rebellion flamed, engulfing her. "All right, Father, you go ahead and think whatever you want! I did the right thing, and I'm standing by my decision!" She turned on her heel and ran from him, leaving their expensive dinner untouched on the plates.

Matthan stared rather vacantly around the small but elegant room. She'd splurged to afford this special dinner on the RISING STAR, but it was wasted cubits. He wasn't going to give his approval to this, not ever. She took cadet training against my wishes, as soon as she was old enough. And now, she thinks I should be pleased she is in Blue Squadron. That was Monk's squadron, and Captain Apollo is still its flight leader. They take the most dangerous missions. They're the suicide squadron...

He didn't care if she and Apollo were in love; Omega would've been a better choice for her -- he, at least, had a sane head on his shoulders, and it was likely to stay there. He was as steady as his father had been, would've kept her from doing such a stupid thing.

But Apollo... She'd follow him to Hades. Unless he sends her there without him.

Matthan's powerful fist clenched more tightly on the goblet he held. The metal slowly bent under the pressure, and golden ambrosia spilled onto the carpet.

Apollo was responsible for Monk's death. He was responsible... The thought ran like a litany through his mind as he dropped the misshapen goblet and left the chamber. The fine meal cooled, uneaten.

* * * * *

Two patrols landed almost simultaneously.

"Not bad for your first time out!" Diedre congratulated her young wing-mate. Magdala's first patrol had gone well.

"Of course, she did good!" interjected a masculine voice behind the two women. "Monk's little sister couldn't be anything but good." Starbuck draped one arm over each woman's shoulder, drawing them both closer to him.

Diedre glanced over her free shoulder to see Boomer approaching. "When are you going to teach this punk some grammar?"

He grinned in response as he joined them. "When have you ever cared about grammar?" he countered. "But it sounds like you're right -- Magdala's going to make a fine pilot."

The young woman's face flushed with delight. The easy banter the squadron-mates shared was something she still had to get used to. That, and the fact that she could now join in with them, no longer an intruding kid, but one of them.

"Flying with me, what else could she be?" Diedre retorted. "I'm sorry to say I never knew Monk, but I think we ought to be fair enough to admit she could become a fine pilot entirely on her own!" Her challenging smile was directed at both Starbuck and Boomer.

Starbuck immediately disengaged his arm from the black woman. "Right, right!" he declared. "And I wouldn't want to argue with you on that, knowing your temper as I do..."

Diedre fixed him with a level stare, one fist pounding into the opposite palm. "Starbuck, if you weren't so charming, some woman would've killed you a long time ago. I know several who might be convinced to help right now."

The men both laughed. Starbuck's reputation was legendary, and he did nothing to discourage it.

Diedre and Magdala joined in after a micron, the cadet revelling in the teasing, still flushed with confidence from the joy of completing her first patrol, and receiving accolades from these experienced Warriors. I'm truly one of them now!

Starbuck dropped his arm from around Magdala. "Boomer, do you think you could handle debriefing? I've got a hot appointment..."

"You've always got someplace you've absolutely got to be when it's time to make reports!" the other man declared, rolling his eyes in mock indignation and self-righteousness. "And I get stuck with them! But I suppose I can handle our poor, injured Captain..."

"What's wrong with him?" Diedre interrupted, looking concerned.

Starbuck and Boomer both guffawed. "Seems he sprained his wrist playing triad yesterday," Starbuck began. "One of those little kids managed to accomplish what none of our opponents ever have in any game we've ever played..."

"Hey!" Magdala interjected, leaping to the Captain's defence. "One of those little boys got in the way! Apollo was just trying to avoid running into him, and he fell badly!" She felt an injured sense of outrage at Starbuck's talking that way about Apollo, even in fun.

"All right, all right," Starbuck conceded with a grin. "It was all for a good cause, demonstrating triad to some inept kids. But he can't fly for a few days -- and you know how he gets when he's supposed to be 'laid up'!"

Diedre made a face. "As bad as you?"

"Worse!" Starbuck declared unequivocally. "So you'll handle the report?" he asked, turning to his wing-man.

Boomer shrugged. "Sure."

"Wish somebody'd handle mine!" Diedre grumbled with a sidelong glance at Magdala.

The girl instantly grabbed the opportunity to see Apollo. "I can do it," she said, trying to sound nonchalant and at ease, as if this were nothing more to her than a small exchange of favours between friends.

"Will you? Thanks, Mag. I owe you!"

"Sure!" With a quick smile, Magdala headed away at a rapid, eager pace.

"Hmm!" Boomer observed. "Guess I'd better catch up with her, or Apollo'll bust us for not being prompt for debriefings!"

Diedre and Starbuck were left laughing. "Does Apollo know that the kid's chasing him?" the woman finally asked as they strolled away from their ships.

"Are you kidding? Apollo'd probably blush as much as she does when we tease her -- if he even thought it. He still sees her as Monk's little sister, treats her like one of the family."

"Think he'll get the hint?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "She's not the first cadet to fall for a squadron leader. They usually get over it quick enough. If it ever dawns on Apollo that she cares for him, he'll probably lie low until she gets over it and finds somebody else. She's only seventeen -- Apollo made that very clear to me one day," There was no point in making a big deal of it. As he'd said, it often happened that young cadets fancied themselves in love with experienced, heroic superiors.

"What really gets me," he added introspectively, "is why she chose a frigid guy like Apollo to fall for, and not somebody warm like me..."

His words turned into a yelp of pain as something connected hard with his ankle. It was Diedre's foot.

* * * * *

The hellish battle might have been planned by Mephistopheles himself.

Cylons ambushed a two-man patrol. The experienced pilot, a member of Red Squadron, died in the first micron. Her young wing-man, one of the GALACTICA's "nine-day-wonders," panicked, and fled back to his base ship. The Cylons, sensing his goal, followed eagerly, permitting the youth to lead them without firing on him.

The GALACTICA threw up an electronic jamming screen as soon as her crew realized what was happening. All Viper squadrons were launched, and the battlestar herself moved into combat. The Raiders couldn't be allowed to escape and report they had found the human refugees. The safety of the Fleet lay in its ability to hide from the Cylons as it fled; its location and secret goal had to be protected at all costs.

Keyed up and tense, knowing their failure could mean the destruction of all that survived from the Colonies, the Warriors flew and fought with desperate ferocity. They had the Cylons outnumbered, but the need to ensure that all their attackers perished was a psychological sword hanging over their collective heads.

They had to follow when a few Raiders disengaged and ran from the battle. Blue Squadron pursued, splitting up as necessary to track the enemy down.

"Boomer, Starbuck, get that one breaking left!" Apollo ordered tensely. The Cylons had gone to extra effort, it seemed, to make sure his first flight after his minor injury was a memorable one.

"Right."

The field was almost cleaned up. The Raider ahead should be the last. It seemed to realize it had no chance to escape, and abruptly changed its tactics. It must've hit braking flaps, for it suddenly seemed to go into reverse as the Colonial fighters closed on it. Apollo smiled grimly -- his Warriors knew that trick, too, and they wouldn't fall for it. He hit his own braking flaps.

"Mag! No!" Diedre's cry over the comm held urgency and horror as one of the Vipers overshot the Raider before braking.

Apollo cursed. He hit his thrusters again, almost blacking out from the sudden whiplash. She'd be right in the Cylon's sights, unless one of them could...

They couldn't, not fast enough. The solitary Viper disintegrated in a glow of laser fire.

"Magdala?" he heard Diedre call uncertainly.

He took the Raider out himself. There was nothing left in space but Vipers.

"Who was it?" Apollo heard Starbuck call softly. He and Boomer had seen the Viper destroyed.

"Monk's little sister," Diedre replied, equally softly.

They flew back in silence.

* * * * *

On the bridge, Omega listened woodenly to the report from the incoming squadrons. Adama saw his

expression. "You knew one of the casualties?" he asked quietly.

Omega's glance was void, his words delivered flatly. "I knew Magdala. Our families were close; her brother and I were at the Academy together... I'd like to be the one to tell her father, if I may, Commander. She was all the family he had left..."

Adama felt the younger man's pain. To have to hear something like that himself... "Call your shift replacement. Go tell him."

"Thank you, sir."

* * * * *

"You sure you want to do this, Apollo?" Starbuck asked as the two Warriors landed on the Arian freighter in the middle of the Fleet.

"Yes," the Captain replied briefly.

Starbuck felt the sadness the other man's voice tried to conceal. Magdala wasn't the only casualty that day, but she was the one closest to them. She'd been in Blue Squadron; it was her first fire-fight; and she'd been only seventeen.

He knew Apollo had never realized the girl was infatuated with him; maybe it was just as well. He also knew how his friend reacted to losing those close to him; even if he didn't care for the girl, just knowing she loved him would've hurt, and made him feel uncomfortably responsible.

And maybe Apollo felt something of a debt extending back to Monk, too, for some reason. Monk and Magdala had been close, even for brother and sister; the girl'd hung around for yahrens, and been inordinately proud of her brother. Monk used to bring the then-gangly young girl around; she was teased constantly about being the squadron's mascot. Now, she'd followed her brother in more ways than one; only their father was left.

And Apollo probably couldn't help making comparisons with his own family, and thinking how easily it could happen...

"Want me to wait for you?" Starbuck asked meekly. He'd come this far; he might as well wait until Apollo finished his melancholy duty. Diedre was already on her way back to clean out Magdala's things; there was no reason to hurry back to the GALACTICA.

"Thanks." Without another word, the Captain took off through the landing bay, leaving Starbuck standing by their ships.

The Lieutenant waved at a pair of techs who came rushing over to find out if anything was wrong. "Nothing wrong, guys," he called to them. "But if you got time, you wanna refuel the Vipers? We may have to leave in a hurry, if you know what I mean..."

The techs, not much more than kids, were quick to oblige him, eyes wide at the chance to handle the sleek fighter craft. Their usual jobs must be awful mundane, Starbuck thought as he watched them. But, damn, we got kids doin' everything these days... He felt, suddenly, very old and tired, and getting rapidly more tired. The Destruction, and everything that happened since, had aged him a lot faster than time had a right to. His friends, too. It was wearing them all out before their time...

* * * * *

Matthan stared at the dark-haired man. The bad news wasn't really unexpected, but he wished it hadn't come so soon. Warriors died young, some of them, before any human had a right to have his life demanded of him. But this Captain Apollo, he seems likely to outlive them all. He's already outlived his time, beaten death more than most. Monk and Magdala are dead, and this man continues to live... Rage flared in the depths of his soul, flooded his mind. It's not fair!

"I'm sorry," the man repeated. Matthan forced himself to listen. "She was as good as any other Warrior. She just got caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. If there had been anything we could do..."

Yes, sure...!

"Her wing-mate will bring her things back later, if you want them. You have the sympathy of the entire squadron. We all liked Magdala; we'll all miss her..."

Liked? She said you loved her, you bastard! Or do you stop caring when they're dead? You're a deadly man to love... The demon screaming inside his mind demanded some sort of vengeance.

"Thank you for coming in person, Captain. I'm glad you took the time to talk to me." He knew what he had to do, to protect the other Warriors, the young ones like Monk and Magdala. He would keep them safe.

"I wish there was something more I could say or do," Apollo said, looking down. The grief was too controlled to be real, the drawn look had to be false...

"There is one thing, Captain..."

"Yes?" He looked up questioningly.

Matthan raised his left hand as if it held something. "There was something I think Magdala would've liked for you to have..."

The powerful right fist slammed savagely into the young man's jaw, knocking him flying. Apollo never saw the punch coming; he reeled back, the side of his head colliding cruelly with the wall before he crumpled into a heap on the cold floor.

Satisfaction grew in Matthan's cold, fanatical green eyes. I will protect the others. The threat this Captain Apollo represents to them will be removed. He bent over; grunting as he hoisted the unconscious body over his shoulders.

* * * * *

I have to set my own misery aside. This will be a cruel blow to Matthan, and I must be strong, find the right balance of grieving with him and being a support for him.

Omega had been like another son to the old mechanic; he hoped he was enough to make up for the loneliness of losing the last of his family. It didn't help that he wanted desperately to simply hide himself away and mourn Magdala's loss. She'd been so beautiful, and he'd loved her so much, for so long... If there'd been a little more time for her to grow up, they might have found an opportunity to share that love. But as it was...

The landing bay was almost empty. The few moments he'd taken to compose himself and find the right words had allowed the shuttle to empty and the personnel to hurry to their own tasks. The only

people near him were a pair of young men fussing over two Vipers. Then Omega noticed a pilot sitting alone next to one of the ships. It was Lieutenant Starbuck, of Blue Squadron -- of Magdala's squadron. If he was here, maybe Captain Apollo was, too, and the job perhaps already done...

"Hello, Lieutenant. Are you here alone?" He thought he sounded reasonably controlled, and he had a right to know if someone was already with Matthan.

The young Warrior looked up. "Hi, Omega." Those sharp blue eyes never missed a thing. "You here to see Magdala's father?"

"Yes. I've known him a long time, and thought it might be better to hear the bad news from a friend."

"Apollo's already there."

"I suspected as much when I saw you."

"You loved the kid, didn't you?"

There seemed little point in answering. Admitting he loved her wouldn't bring her back; denying it would likewise be to no avail. He chose to nod, wishing the Lieutenant wouldn't ask questions like that. "I knew Magdala for a long time. But she was too young. I'd hoped when she was older..."

Starbuck nodded knowingly, but Omega thought he looked a little embarrassed.

"I should go. Matthan was a friend of my father's for yahrens. I should be there," he finished brusquely. He had nothing against the young pilot, but just now, he didn't want to continue the conversation.

He hurried away, but his footsteps slowed as soon as he reached the deck where Matthan's quarters were. The numbness was wearing off. He wasn't sure he wanted to be there; he knew he would be welcome, as he'd always been, but he wished it were for any other reason.

He hesitated a moment at the door, then touched the chime panel. After a moment, he heard a muffled, "Come in."

The room was empty. He heard the older man bumping around in the other chamber. As he set his hand to that door, it opened, and the man who'd been like family to him for yahrens pushed out into the room, shoving him back from the door.

"Omega." The tone was guarded, and Matthan's eyes kept darting around the chamber, nervous and wary, looking for something. He kept one hand out of sight behind his back.

"What's wrong?" Omega asked immediately. Something was disturbing him; the man was tense, but elated, too, shaking with anticipation. "Uncle Matt, what is it?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'm pleased to see you. Why are you here?"

Omega stared. "Didn't Captain Apollo...?"

"He hasn't been here. Why?"

"It's Magdala. She was in the battle today, and... But you know, you have to know. Captain

Apollo wouldn't... Starbuck said he was here to tell you, and I know he'd have come..." Why was Matthan behaving so erratically? He could see it in the way the man kept looking away from him, in the strange excitement lighting his eyes. Something was very wrong here...

"You loved my Maggie, didn't you?" Matthan asked abruptly, catching his wrist, staring at him intently.

Did everybody know except Magdala? Now, it was his turn to squirm. "Yes, yes, I did. But I never said or did anything improper. I knew she was too young. I was willing to wait..."

"I know that. I also know she's dead; he told me, before... Will you avenge her murder?"

"What?" He froze. "The Cylons killed her. What are you talking about?" A chill ran down his spine. "Where's Captain Apollo?"

Matthan gestured at the door to his sleeping chambers. "Waiting." There was something maniacal in his smile, his laughter. "She loved him, and he betrayed her to the Cylons, betrayed us all..."

"Huh?" Magdala loved Apollo? No, it can't be... A flush of anguish joined the grief, a sense of rejection that suddenly made sense out of numerous things she'd said since the day she'd begun her training. If she loved Apollo, it all makes sense. I just didn't see it... No, it can't be! It's just the raving of...

...of a madman. Matthan's grief had overbalanced him, wrecked his equilibrium and sense of reality. Omega finally recognized it. There had been a lot of it among the survivors at first, a near-insanity that erupted into violence several times in the Fleet -- and unknown times in the Colonies during those first horrible days after the Destruction. But what would Matthan do now?

"She loved him, you see, and he betrayed her to them, let the Cylons kill her while he stood aside. Just like he did to Monk. Just like he's done to the others... Omega, help give justice. You loved her -- avenge her!" Matthan's eyes peered into his, glistening with a madness that seemed contagious. There was something hypnotic in the madman's words and gaze.

Omega felt a wave of rage and hatred unfamiliar to him; nausea swept immediately after it. Maybe madness is contagious?

Matthan saw it, grabbed his arm, and pulled him back to the bed chamber door. "I knew you'd help when you heard, when you saw..."

* * * * *

Apollo's head ached, as if it had been split in two along a fault line on the right side. There was a similar line of fire in his jaw; he tried to move his mouth, and nearly passed out from the pain. Then he realized his arms had been pulled behind his back and tied with something. His left hand felt numb -- how in Hades had he managed to sprain his wrist again?

He remembered a punch he hadn't seen in time to dodge, and sudden blackout. Magdala's father hit me! Where am I now?

He lifted his head, trying to look around without moving too much. Every little movement caused throbs of agony that spread through his body like light-speed waves on a disturbed pond. He was lying on a bed in somebody's rather plain, cramped quarters. His arms were bound behind him. There was something stuffed in his mouth -- meant as a gag, obviously. Somebody didn't want him making any noise. Didn't want him going anywhere, either -- his ankles were tied as well.



His holster and gunbelt were gone. Is that it? Did Matthan want a weapon? Why? What have I walked into? And what's going to happen to me now?

He heard a door open behind him somewhere, and tried to roll over. Bad mistake. All the little waves of pain intensified. His senses swam blurrily for a moment, and he felt sick to his stomach. Then the image focussed.

Two men stood over him. One was Matthan, the dead Cadet's father. He had a tight grip on the other man's shoulder -- Flight Officer Omega. Omega was pale, staring at him. Matthan had a fanatical look about him, and he carried a laser -- his own weapon, Apollo realized rather belatedly.

"You see?" Matthan demanded huskily, smiling demonically and keeping a tight grip on the shivering Omega. "We have him. We can avenge them, Monk, and Maggie, and all the others who died."

"It was the Cylons..."

"She loved him, and he let her down! You loved her; you would have saved her. It's your right to avenge her, now." Matthan thrust the weapon into Omega's hand. Apollo could see him staring at it with horror even as his fingers closed on it; the weight seemed almost too much for him to hold.

Sagan, they're going to kill me! He recognized the look. Insanity on Matthan's face, and something in Omega's features that suggested he'd been mesmerized. He'd kill him without thinking or realizing what he was doing.

"No..." Omega shook his head. "No, Matthan, no. This isn't right, it won't help Magdala... Please, let's talk this over. We can help you. Killing Apollo won't bring them back..." His voice grew stronger, more urgent, as he turned to face the mechanic, reaching for his shoulder.

"You're supporting him?" Matthan screamed suspiciously. "You didn't deserve her, either! None of you did! You're all responsible! I'm glad she's gone!"

The scene blurred again for several microns as Apollo tried to move. He blinked, trying to bring it back. He could hear sounds, a scuffle, somebody crying out, a laser blast!

His vision cleared. He saw Omega crouched against the bulkhead, clutching at his side. Matthan shot him. And I'm next...

But Matthan didn't turn on him. He held the weapon tightly in his grasp, staring down at Omega, shaking his head in disbelief. "No. That wasn't supposed to happen..." He backed through the door, and it closed behind him, shutting them apart from him.

Omega pulled himself to his feet, stumbling to the door as fast as he could. Whether he meant to lock it as a defence against Matthan or to follow his old friend, Apollo didn't know.

The Flight Officer froze where he stood when the sound of a laser shot came through the door.

Apollo watched as Omega collapsed against the wall, crying. The Captain couldn't feel much of anything any more, except light-headedness. He was passing out again...

* * * * *

Starbuck found them. His impatient, inquisitive nature led him to search for Apollo when he got

tired of waiting in the landing bay -- the freighter, after all, didn't even have a decent bar. But he certainly didn't expect what he saw when he stepped into the mechanic's quarters.

He found Matthan sprawled on the floor in his own blood, staring at the ceiling. Shocked at the unexpected carnage, Starbuck called Security.

His fears were relieved when he found Apollo, still unconscious and bound, but alive. His friend would be all right. Omega had passed out, was losing blood from the wound in his side, but Doctor Salik rushed him to surgery, and he, too, would be all right.

Security's investigation was brief. Study of the scene, coupled with statements from Captain Apollo and Flight Officer Omega, both in Life Centre on the GALACTICA, confirmed the official verdict. Matthan had died of a self-inflicted wound from Apollo's weapon. Suicide.

* * * * *

Apollo and Omega both missed the ceremony of mourning several days later. They were still in Life Centre. Apollo's broken jaw and dislocated shoulder had been quickly taken care of, but he still had a headache from the minor concussion; the wound in Omega's side would keep him bed-ridden for several days longer.

The ceremony for Matthan was less well attended than the one for Cadet Magdala of Blue Squadron. Starbuck was at both; Magdala had been in his squadron, and he was the one who'd found Matthan. He felt duty-bound to be there for each of them.

Then he carried word back to both Apollo and Omega, who was especially grateful for his thoughtfulness.

* * * * *

Apollo was restless. Magdala, and the events following her death, had left an unhappy imprint on his mind. A micron of excited over-eagerness on a young woman's part, and she would never reach her eighteenth birthday. Cylon fire had found her, as it had found her older brother.

Her father's reaction had been the unexpected part. From what he'd been told, the man had been moody and depressed since the Destruction -- but then, who among them hadn't been affected by that horrible event? It had been too much, that final loss, knowing his last child was also a victim of the war.

So the man had decided to take it out on him. Only Omega's unexpected arrival, he was sure, had kept him alive. But Matthan was raving that she loved me, that I let her down, that I was responsible...

His insanity was something else. Apollo wasn't sure how to respond or react to the man's accusation. It left him feeling very uncomfortable indeed.

* * * * *

Omega huddled miserably in his bed. He'd been alone with his thoughts for far too many centars, thinking of Magdala and Matthan, and what had happened, and what would never happen...

He just wanted to get back to his job. In the Destruction of the Fleet and the Colonies, that had sustained him, kept him going when his friends were falling apart all around him. He'd kept his shock and grief inside, working bleakly on. Forcing cold hands to do their job had kept him sane

then.

But now, there didn't seem to be anything he could do. He couldn't return to the Bridge for at least a section, and the medics limited his visitors. He was supposed to rest.

Rest! How was he supposed to rest when laughing eyes, a freckled nose, and a wide smile kept slipping into his thoughts? And the memory of Matthan's last moments alive kept tearing him apart. How can I rest?

"May I come in?"

He recognized Apollo's voice, and gave his permission with a brief nod. Anything's better than being alone...

"Was Starbuck here?" the Captain asked, sitting carefully on the edge of the bed.

He nodded again, sighing quietly. "For a centon."

The two men sat uncomfortably for several centons, neither knowing what to say, yet each unwilling to be alone with his own thoughts.

"What was Matthan saying, just before the end, about Magdala...caring...for me?" Apollo finally asked, unable to meet the other man's gaze.

Omega choked down something bitter as he controlled his reaction to that question. He slowly uncurled a clenched fist, trying to find words.

Then he realized this was nothing Apollo had looked for, or wanted. What Magdala felt for him -- or any man -- was of her own choosing. No one could tell her what to do. She'd always been strong-minded, stubborn.

And he knew the tales from back at the Academy, about how cadets were always falling in love with their instructors, sometimes getting involved with them to the detriment of both parties. There'd been at least one scandal every yahren he'd been there; it was probably expected. There was no reason to be angry or bitter toward Apollo, as Matthan had been. There was no cause for it, and there was nothing the Captain could have done to change things.

"He was raving," he finally answered, his voice tight and thoughtful. "She was his last child, his youngest. She looked a lot like his wife. He's been different since the Destruction, colder, more remote. I guess he just needed to blame somebody he could reach and touch. The Cylons were too distant, too frustrating to hate for this. He needed something close. You were her squadron leader, her teacher for most of her training. I guess he just picked you as a convenient target.

"Don't dwell on it. It was nothing you did. You were just there."

Apollo stared at the wall, taking a deep, relieved breath. "So that's all there is to it. Now, they're all gone -- Matthan, and his family. Monk, and now, Magdala, too, his little sister..."

They shared the silence.



The ULTIMATE VICTOR



by Mary S. Jones

"The Ultimate Victor"

(By Mary S. Jones)

A wrecked Cylon shuttle, with no signs of life... But then Apollo and Starbuck found the beautiful blonde sealed in her cryogenic tube. They took her back to the GALACTICA, where the intelligent, quick-witted young woman trained as a Viper pilot and member of the elite Speciality Squad.

But amnesia haunted her. And her only real memory was no comfort -- for she believed the traitor Baltar was her father.

Marisoo quickly proved her worth on a contact mission. Shuttle sabotage nearly killed Apollo and Starbuck, but her intervention saved both men. Then religious fanatics, believing Apollo to be the son of a god -- and convinced that he must die for the well-being of "his people" -- prepared to sacrifice Starbuck in his honour and to seal him in a tomb. Again, Marisoo saved them both.

The three Warriors hurriedly left the planet in one Viper and the shuttle Marisoo had expertly repaired -- only to be captured by the Cylons, and taken as prisoners to their base star. Commanding that base star was...Baltar.

Marisoo confronted the traitor, securing the release of her two friends and determining at last that Baltar was no blood relation. The Warriors fled back to the GALACTICA.

But an epidemic of unidentified nature and origin was raging on the battlestar, and Commander Adama suspected that the beautiful young stranger might somehow be involved. When the returning shuttle landed, Marisoo was placed under arrest; Apollo and Starbuck were strictly quarantined. All three were hurried to decontamination prior to imprisonment.

Can the GALACTICA survive the epidemic? Are Apollo and Starbuck doomed to die from some terrible alien disease? And can the lovely Marisoo really be a Cylon agent? Read on...

Part V (Conclusion)

Marisoo was miserable. Locked in an isolation ward until the doctors finished their testing and sampling prior to confining her in prison, she was unable to see any of her friends -- what few of them were still healthy and believed she was innocent! She had too much time on her hands -- too much time to think of the terrible thing her presence might be doing to these people who had befriended her, and too much time to consider her probable fate if she was indeed some Cylon agent. Sitting cross-legged on her bed, alone, chin resting on her arms, she looked as woebegone as she felt.

She didn't notice when Apollo entered the chamber, and looked up in surprise when he cleared his throat. "Apollo! You're free!" She smiled at him, then suddenly remembered the reason for her incarceration, and gasped in alarm. "But you shouldn't be here! You might get sick!"

He smiled back at her, and crossed the room to sit beside her on the bed. "Nonsense. If I were going to get sick, I'd already be ill. I've seen more of you than most people around here. And I've cleared decontamination. I'll take my chances with further exposure."

She smiled wanly at the attempted humour, then looked down. "What is it you want? I've told the doctors everything I know, which isn't much I'm afraid."

"I know," he answered softly. "They told me. But back on that planet where we almost died, you started remembering when we were together, and your mind was at ease. I thought it might help if I were here with you."

"Thank you. I appreciate it. I just wish I thought it would do some good."

"You don't look happy." He reached over and brushed her long hair away from her face. "Care to talk about it?"

"There's something running through my mind," she replied softly, distantly. "It's a line from a poem, or maybe a play of some kind -- from home, wherever that is. 'To be, or not to be,' that's how it starts. It asks whether life is worth living, or if there are times when the alternative is justified. Right now, I can identify with that..."

"Don't think that way, Marisoo," Apollo admonished. "You're a valuable member of this crew, and we all care about you. This'll get straightened out soon, I'm sure. But I don't think I've ever heard that line before, and I always thought I was fairly well-read..."

She looked up at him, plainly puzzled. "But it's so well-known! Everybody has to study it..."

"Who wrote it?" he persisted.

"I don't remember," the young woman finally said in a faltering voice. "There are so many things I can't seem to remember, just can't put into place..."

He could see tears in her eyes, and panic growing in her again. He caught her in his arms. "Marisoo, don't... You're safe with us. You don't have to worry. Let your memory come back in its own time."

"But it's so important! What if the Cylons did something to me, to my mind, that I can't remember? Maybe I really am their agent..."

"Don't!" he ordered more firmly.

"Oh, Apollo, you've always taken such good care of me! I appreciate it, I really do, but the feelings inside, not knowing about people and places and things I should remember... I have to place them! I just have to remember!"

"Marisoo," he whispered intently, "I want to take care of you always! I understand now that what I feel for you eclipses anything I've ever felt for anyone before! Let me love you, take care of you, hold you..."

She stared at him in shock. "But...Serina!"

"Yes, I loved her. But now, I love you. You've completely taken her place in my heart, and Boxey loves you, too. Can you care for me? Can we try to face life together?" He held her closer, kissing her hair, and she could feel his heart beating against hers.

"I don't want to take anyone's place!" she said fiercely. "I want to make my own! Give me time, Apollo, give us both that!" I wish I could respond with what you want, but I can't...

"Is there someone else? Is it Starbuck?"

"No, I told you it wasn't him! I'd be honest with you if there was someone else, you know that!"

"I believe you, and I'm willing to wait," he murmured, his face still in her hair, his lips against her soft ear. "You're worth waiting for, if there's even a chance, however long..."

She laughed suddenly, bitterness colouring her sweet voice. "Even if I'm in prison? Everyone would think you sealed yourself to a traitor!"

She couldn't bear to be close to him any longer, and pulled away with a shuddering breath, rising from the bed to pace in agitation. Why not tell him there's someone else, someone who doesn't return my love the way I want? It'll break his heart, but at least he'll be free!

He watched her for several moments. "Marisoo," he announced quietly, "I don't give up easily. And I told you, we'll find a way out of this, somehow. I know we will. Just have a little faith in me, in us..."

She faced him, and would have responded, but Doctor Salik chose that moment to enter the isolation chamber. He was dressed in disposable clothing and wore the face mask required for dealing with a potential plague carrier. He glanced at Apollo with displeasure, then shrugged his shoulders as if to say it was too late to do anything about his behaviour -- and at any rate, the Captain would just ignore his advice anyway, where this girl was concerned. He turned to Marisoo.

"We've completed every possible test on you, and we may have isolated the virus responsible for the disease."

She thought she would faint. "And?" she demanded. Apollo stood behind her, ready to support her if necessary, equally eager to hear the results.

"We're still trying to work on a serum and treatment, but we'd like you to look at some of the

victims. Maybe seeing the stages of the disease will jar your memory."

She shuddered, remembering how many of her friends were ill, but knew the doctor was doing his best to help. The man truly liked her, but the present situation stretched friendship very thin. She nodded. "Of course. I told you I'll do anything I can to help in this."

"Follow me."

The first victim was Boomer. She stared for a moment at his dark, blotched face. He had been so nice to her, teaching her so much from his own stock of electronic wizardry. She felt a sob welling up within her, but no answers.

She stepped to the next tube and gasped at the sight of Athena's pale face, marred with small red blemishes. Her room-mate and special confidante, who shared a myriad of girlish secrets those first few sections... Given a choice, at that moment Marisoo would gladly have thrown herself, screaming, at a Cylon laser cannon, if it would have helped her friends. She would rather have died before coming here to bring this terrible thing upon her friend, the sister of another close friend, the daughter of the man...

A thought burst upon her in a stunning moment of revelation. I remember! I know what it is! "Measles!" she exclaimed, laughing through sudden tears. "It's only measles!"

"What?" the medical officer demanded in astonishment. "You remember? You know what this is? Can you help us, tell us what to do about it?" He held his breath.

"Yes, of course!" she laughed. "It's measles! It's only a childhood disease! And the red blotches -- they're the measles, incidentally, not the fever or anything -- are the sign that the worst is over, that the disease is running its course! It's not the end, or death! Take them out of the tubes. Let them stay warm and rest for a few days with good care; they'll be fine! The measles mean the fever's breaking, and it's almost over! And you can prepare an inoculation for the rest of the Fleet after studying the blood and the immuno-system of someone who's already recovered! You can study me! I had it when I was three!" She thrust her arm at him joyfully, willing to expend every drop of her blood to help the Fleet.

The doctor leaned weakly against one of the life support pods. "Thank you, Marisoo," he said with relief. "We'll get teams in here right away to work on it. You may well have saved many lives, your own included. This can only be to your benefit at the trial."

The trial! They still think I'm a traitor, and are going to put me on trial for it... Relief so quickly replaced by renewed fear overwhelmed her, and she fainted dead away into Apollo's strong arms.

* * * * *

"What the devil is she doing now?" one of them asked in disgust.

"It doesn't matter," another replied, a grim set to her lips. "It'll all be over in a few minutes."

* * * * *

The trial was scheduled quickly. Public sentiment still ran high against the girl who might be Baltar's daughter, although Apollo and Starbuck both spread the tale of her brief confrontation with the man, and his denial that she was any child of his. The recovering Warriors were also



quick to her defence, but Adama knew it was in the best interests of Fleet morale and cohesion to have the matter settled once and for all. He thought there was little chance of her being found guilty after her identification of the mysterious disease and her subsequent assistance to the medical department. Once the facts were clear to the entire Fleet, he was sure -- and a recovering Colonel Tigh concurred -- that her possibly stained past would be left behind and forgotten.

The Commander himself officiated, and Apollo took it upon himself to act as Marisoo's Protector. Starbuck, Athena, and Doctor Salik were the major defence witnesses, although most of Blue Squadron volunteered to be character references; they packed the gallery reserved for spectators. As this was basically a military matter, the Warriors had first claim to the seats, and only a few muttering civilians managed to squeeze into the crowded chamber. Others waited outside, impatient to hear the results.

The Opposer's opening statements and evidence were slim, consisting of little more than an acknowledgement that Marisoo had been discovered in the company of Cylons -- whether as captive or equal partner could not be determined -- and that the strange disease, "measles," had indeed come aboard with her.

Then it was Apollo's turn. He called Marisoo to speak first.

She went nervously to the witness chair, and her voice squeaked as she took the oath of truth; the Opposer had been brutal in his statements. She sat down and waited, her eyes fastened pleadingly on Apollo's, hoping this wouldn't be too difficult. She felt embarrassed at how little she knew of her own past, and ashamed to proclaim it before the entire Fleet.

"State your name, position, and planet of origin," the Captain began briskly.

"As I said before," she began, "my name is Marisoo. I am a Lieutenant in the Colonial Warriors, and a pilot in Blue Squadron of the battlestar GALACTICA." Apollo had commissioned her for outstanding courage and intelligent actions on the scouting mission, and later, on the Cylon base star. "But as to the planet of my origin, I don't know." A wave of dizziness suddenly passed over her, and an image formed in her mind -- a blue and white world; dark, rich soil, green with life; clear flowing water...

Several of the civilians looked disgusted by her repeated denial of any knowledge of her planet of birth, but the Warriors nodded encouragingly at her.

"Of what family or tribe, then, if you don't know what planet?" Apollo continued formally, using the standard line of questioning for the circumstances.

"I don't know that, either," she replied, as the image faded away from her. "I once believed myself to be the daughter of Count Baltar, the traitor, but he denied any knowledge of me. I have no idea what family or tribe I was born into."

"Very well, we shall proceed, then, Lieutenant," Apollo said quietly. But his words didn't penetrate to her. Suddenly disoriented, she caught a glimpse of herself, not in Colonial uniform, but in some clinging dress of a blue fabric that matched her eyes. She was walking with a group of people, laughing about something...

"Marisoo?"

She had to force her attention back to the present, and she found herself staring wonderingly and dreamily at Apollo. The past faded again, and she wanted to cry for losing it. "Yes?" she asked wistfully.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant? Your mind seems to be wandering." He spoke severely, but his face betrayed his concern.

"It was," she replied faintly. "I think I was...home."

The room became deathly silent. Apollo sank to one knee beside her chair. "Where is home?" he asked quietly.

Revelation struck as the strange blue planet seemed to float before her again, with its green grass and trees, its flowing waters, its cities of tall buildings and traffic noises... And the people who were her friends were there, too, beckoning to her, laughing at some shared secret... A smile of rapture spread across her face, and her vision of Apollo blurred as tears welled up in her eyes. She knew...

"Earth!" she whispered. "I am from Earth!"

Sudden excited whispers carried her words throughout the room, and outside, to the waiting crowd. "Earth!" was on every tongue.

"Are you sure?" Apollo demanded in a strangled, husky voice. Adama left his seat to hear better; and Starbuck, too, crept closer. Marisoo smiled at her friends, ecstatic that she finally knew, finally had a place to call home...and a wonderful gift to give them, as well! For Earth was the planet of refuge they sought, and she could lead them to it...

"Like hell you will!" broke in a strident voice.

All eyes swivelled to face the three alien figures that suddenly appeared in the trial chamber. Marisoo blanched as she recognized them. "No!" she whispered faintly.

The shortest of the three, a redhead in loose black trousers and a purple shirt, advanced a few steps. "The game's over, and so is this disaster you call a story. Let's go, Mary Sue."

"No!" she insisted. "You said I could finish this! You said you'd let me..."

"That, my dear, was before we knew what you planned to do!" broke in one of the others, a tall woman with dark braids. "Joy, let's get her out of here before I get sick."

"If you don't come peacefully, we'll call J.R. to carry you. I don't think you'd like that," the third newcomer, a brown-haired woman of medium height, observed.

Marisoo was on her feet, ready to defend herself, but the others in the room could only stare, frozen where they stood or sat; they were like mannequins, unable to move or speak. The young woman stamped her feet, and her fear suddenly gave way to the beginnings of a temper tantrum. "I don't want to go! I'm not done yet! Please? Sharon, Mary Jean, you talk to her..."

"But we agree with her!" the one referred to as Mary Jean said; she was the one with the braids. "This has gone on too long as it is. Are you coming peacefully, or does J.R. have to carry you? He will, you know, if we ask him to."

"And we will ask, if you don't come now!" broke in the redhead.

Marisoo's feet dragged as she stepped forward, looking forlorn and disappointed. "But it's my story!" she wailed.



"And it's our zine," Joy stated impatiently.

The Lieutenant's uniform faded away, replaced by blue jeans and an old, decrepit T-shirt. Her stunning beauty, too, vanished, leaving only a very ordinary-looking young girl.

She joined the three strangers, but not very happily. As they began to fade from view, the limbs of the Colonials in the room began to thaw.

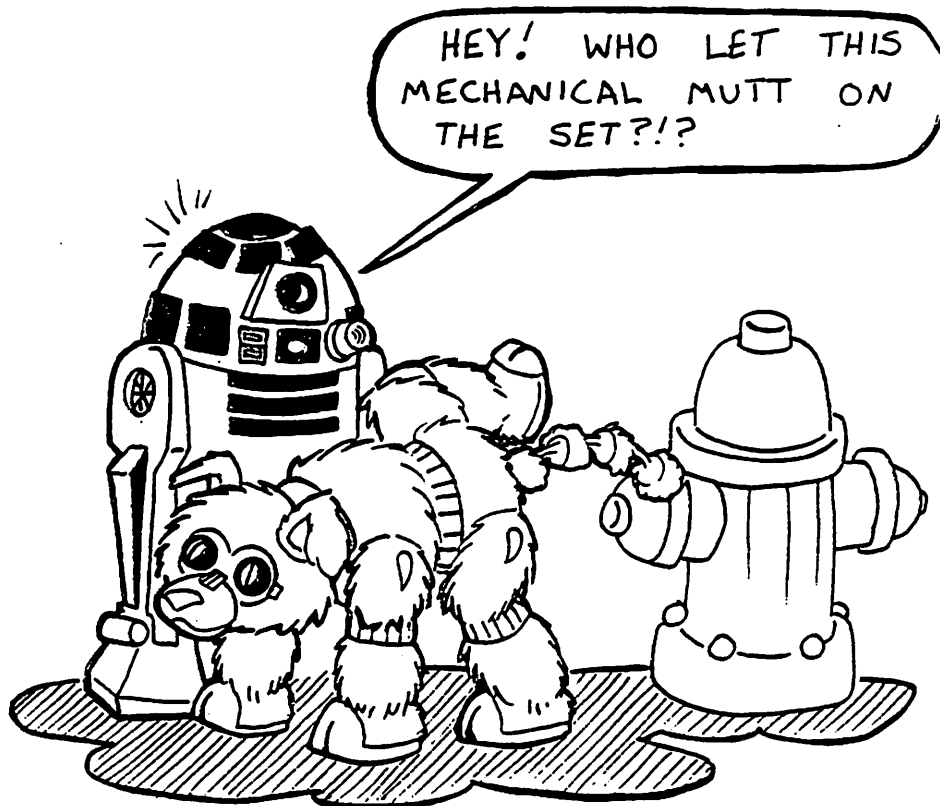
"Don't worry," one of the aliens said soothingly to Mary Sue. "I still think that with a little work and some direction..."

Then they were gone.

Like a man waking from a strange dream, Apollo looked around, then turned to his father. "Who are they?" he asked wonderingly. "Are they dangerous? What do they mean to us?"

Adama stared at his son, awe and some fear still warring in his features. When he spoke, it was with great reverence. "My son, they are entities more powerful and dangerous than any 'ship of lights.' They are part of a force more ancient than the existence of this very universe. They might be gods.

"They are called..." -- his voice dropped an octave -- "...editors!"



KENNY BAKER MEETS MUFFIT

"WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ...?"

H. Ravenwood



"Why Did It Have To Be...?"

(By H. Ravenwood)

Part XI-B

Something had happened at the dome; Tanis could see and hear that much from where he stood. A greyish cloud of dust was rising, and he could hear screams of terror. He raced for the site.

Coughing and squinting in the grimy haze, he waved his arms in a futile attempt to disperse it. There was no breeze; the stuff seemed in no hurry to settle or dissipate. He slowed his pace, feeling more carefully where he put his steps.

"What in Hades...?" He stared at the sunken trench, its sides still crumbling away into the pit that hadn't been there the day before. Part of the dome lay open and broken, staring darkly and accusingly back at him as sand filtered past the shattered lip, through the hole into blackness. The chimney was undamaged, and portions of the diggings around the structure were intact, but the sentiologist could see that several pieces of equipment had slipped away with the sand. From the alarmed expressions of the people around him, he knew some personnel had slipped away, too.

"What happened?" he snapped at the nearest person.

Hands dug deeply into the dirt, and feet poised to kick farther away from the hole if it should prove necessary, the Warrior answered shakily. "Collapse... Like yesterday, only worse. The whole world seemed to fall away...from the dome..." She shivered. This wasn't the first time she had been caught by a cave-in.

"Who was here? Who fell in? How deep is it? Snap out of it, Freya! Damn it, who might be in there?"

She drew a shuddering breath, and seemed to pull herself together. "Uh, Sept and Hefestis were right there..." She looked around at her comrades. "Dolon and Rinda, maybe... I don't know for sure..."

Tanis glared at the others. "Remus! Go for the medics! And we'll probably need special equipment to get in there safely. We have to find out how deep it is..."

As the Survey tech hurried away, Tanis continued to stare at the pit, struck with guilt that he'd left a friend in charge, and that his friend was apparently gone. But then, Sept should have known enough to spot a problem. What happened here?

Freya seemed to be recovering from her shock. She leaned close enough to the pit to snatch back an abandoned brush and trowel that lay on the lip. Some sand fell away from her fingers, but the ground no longer flowed into the hole.

"Syrteis isn't here!" a voice suddenly cried out. A series of anxious calls brought no response.

So that made it five. Sept, the next most senior sentiologist to himself; Hefestis, a metallurgist from Planet Survey; Syrtis, also from Planet Survey; Rinda, from Cultural Survey; and Corporal Dolon, one of the Supply people conscripted for his strong back, rather than for any particular expertise.

Tanis threw himself toward the lip of the pit, creeping dangerously close to peer over its edge into the underworld it no longer concealed. Stale air wafted up to him, but it was breathable. He barely felt the weight as Freya dumped herself across his legs to give him support; two others grabbed his ankles to keep him secure. He strained his eyes, staring downward, listening intently to hear beyond the gentle rasp of sand and dirt.

It wasn't far down, he realized. There was no echo, and he thought he detected the gleam of sunlight on stone not far below him.

"Sept?" he hazarded. "Anyone hear me?" There was no answer. "Where in blazes is that doctor when you need him?" he growled. "We've got ropes, and bracing and the chimney to fasten them to, and the lanterns to see with. Let's get down there..."

* * * * *

Persephone somberly put out her lantern, then reached for the one Corvus carried.

"Why do we have to travel with only one light?" the youth protested. "We've got four, and the shadows around here..."

"And the lanterns' charges are limited," she reminded him. "According to my chronometer, if we can trust any of our equipment down here, we've been in this maze nearly a day already! Who knows how long we could be trapped?"

"We're out of water, but we still gotta save light!" Corvus muttered. "The maggots will be able to see our bodies when they come to munch!"

"Don't get macabre!" Thoth snapped back.

"It's true, isn't it?" the youth demanded. "We don't know how to get out of here -- and the others won't begin to know where to find us, if they've even noticed we're missing..."

"Maybe we need another rest," Persephone suggested.

"A real sleep is what we need -- out of here, and in our own bunks! And a full stomach and something to drink would be nice..."

"That's enough, Corvus." Volsung, a slightly older man, was a steadying influence on his younger comrade. But even he looked hopefully at the Warriors. He wasn't used to centars spent tromping through the dark, round passages and oddly-shaped chambers, and a rest would help his flagging spirits and fraying nerves.

"Half a centar?" Thoth proposed, looking mainly at his fellow Warrior. She nodded acquiescence.

It might save their sanity.

Then again, lost in the labyrinth, maybe it would be more merciful to become crazy as soon as possible. But that would spoil whatever chance we had, and surely the others are looking for us by now...

* * * * *

The darkness withdrew before their lowered lamps. Five people lay in the fine sand, surrounded by thin-cut blocks of stone and other rubble. None of them moved.

Something else did.

Around the perimeter of the collapsed ceiling, staying well clear of the still-sifting dust and human bodies, were...snakes. Hundreds of them -- perhaps thousands -- hissed at the unexpected intrusion. As the lights dropped lower, they drew back, retreating before the alien presence.

Above, on the rim of the dome, several Colonials dared to lean over the edge and peer into the subterranean chamber.

"Snakes..." Tanis's eyes rolled up in his head, and he nearly dropped the rope from which one of the lanterns dangled. "Again. This forsaken planet..." His groan barely carried to his companions.

Freya was undaunted. "Looks like a place we've been before," she commented wickedly, glancing at the sentiologist. "Could be very dangerous. You go first!"

"Sept's moving!" one of the techs interrupted excitedly.

"I see him." Tanis steeled his nerve. "We've got to get down there. Make sure those ropes are secure. Where's Lupus?"

"Here, Tanis." The medic's timing was perfect. He'd been warned what to expect, and already had several med-pacs strapped around his waist and chest. "Where're my patients?"

In the shadowed room below, the snakes withdrew as the Colonials began dropping among them like descending spiders. With lanterns shining brightly and laser-armed guards at the ready, Lupus began tending the five injured expedition members.

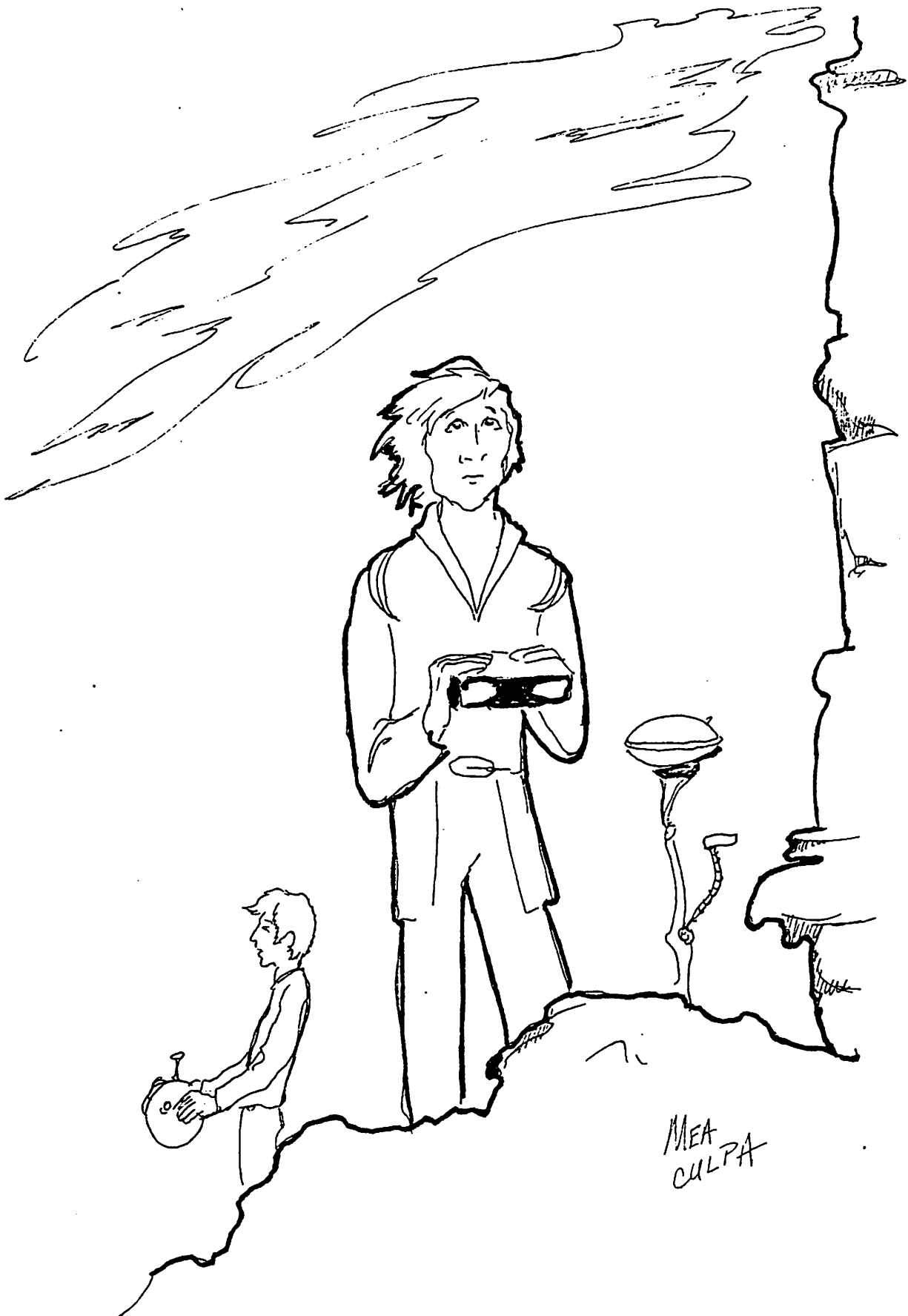
Feeling obliged to aid in the rescue, Tanis strode among them, one hand hovering near the handle of his ever-ready whip.

* * * * *

Quetzal grunted to himself as he trudged under the burden of the "portable" weather station. Gaius wanted it set on the edge of the city facing the coming storm, beyond the buzz of human activity. Captain Diana had promptly obliged and given Quetzal the assignment, declaring solemnly that no civilians were leaving the city limits. Thus a Warrior was given the task of lugging the heavy equipment into the desert before the crimson sun heated the sand beyond endurance.

Not that he really minded the job. It gave him an opportunity to get away from the increasingly paranoid attitudes he detected in his compatriots. The planet was starting to get to some of them.

A small golden sunburst appeared for a micron before him, then was gone again.



"Well, I know you're around here somewhere," the man muttered into the wind after Thorn's vanishing act. The sound was lost among the rolling dunes around him. The city turned so quickly to desert; the last ruins were only a few dozen metres behind him. That small stone shelter was Sentiologist Renet's private sanctum; hopefully, that prickly individual wouldn't mind people passing by several times a day to check the weather equipment being set out.

Once again, Thorn shimmered before his eyes; Quetzal blinked at the unexpected image so close to him. The flying serpent -- mischief-maker and enigma to most of the crew, even those who knew of its existence -- had chosen to reveal itself to him. As a herpetologist, he was fascinated by the creature -- but Thorn seemed inclined to give him only tantalizing, almost mocking glimpses before going its own way.

The smoothly-scaled body flashed before him again, thin-membraned wings whipping frantically, causing a small breeze to cool his nose. Several orange-gold scales lifted to form a crest along the creature's head and back; the man was impressed at the display, viewed from so close a distance.

"Not bad, Thorn. Any significance to it?" He tried to sound nonchalant, although this was his first close, individual encounter with the eerily intelligent being.

He felt a distinctly impatient sensation prick around the edge of his mind. "Lords!" he declared in shock. "You can communicate with us when you want to!"

The serpent fluttered away from him, flying backwards, keeping his face turned toward the man. The sun-bronzed Lieutenant followed the obvious invitation.

A hundred metres beyond the high dune ridge where he'd intended to set up the meteorological station, a second series of sand hills rolled away. In a shallow gully between two of the dunes, Thorn came to rest on a small plot of disturbed sand.

Quetzal stared at the mound piled over some unrecognizable shape. It was possible to tell something was under it, but in another day, the shifting, drifting grit would completely obscure the fact that anything was there. "So what is it, Thorn?"

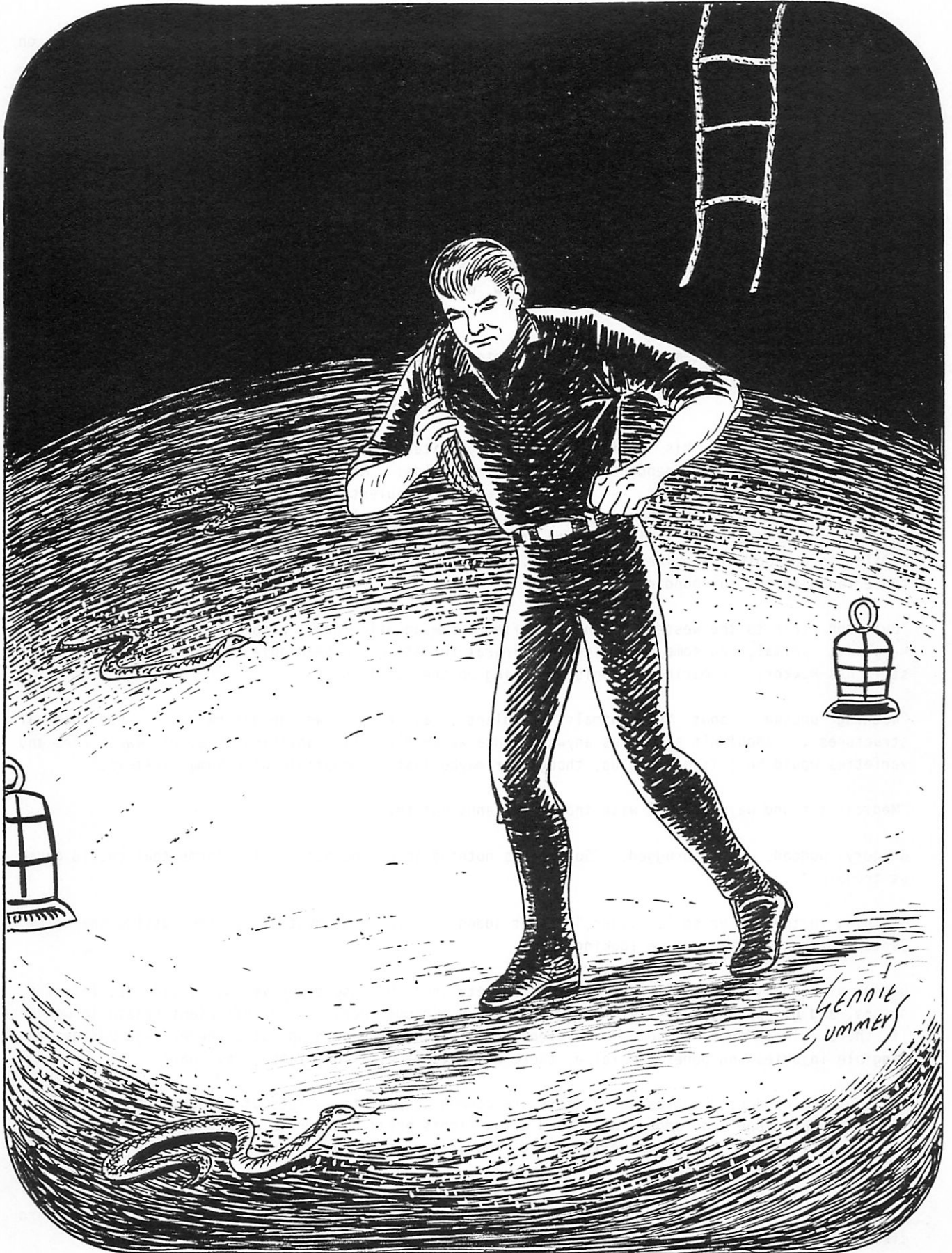
The possibly sentient creature vanished again.

Frowning, Quetzal lowered his burden to the sand, carefully shifting its weight so he wouldn't damage the sensitive instruments or upset their delicate calibration. He knelt beside the pile of sand, and after a moment's hesitation, shoved his hands into the mound and began to dig.

* * * * *

In a round-walled chamber of the Morning Sun Tower, a secret briefing convened, while Warriors kept guard on the parapet above. Captain Diana, as military commander of the expedition and representative of Astrosurvey, was in charge. Captain Talos, Green Squadron's flight leader, and Captain Hannibal, engineer and general information source, backed her up. Lieutenant Gregory represented Biosurvey; Lieutenant Selket answered for Planet Survey; a thin-lipped Ashur, and Sergeant Alexandra were from Cultural Survey. Lieutenant Lavanna was present to add medical opinions if needed.

Diana was surprised when the civilian joined them, but Talos told her the man had information possibly pertinent to their purpose. She let it go, accepting his low-voiced explanation.



"All right," she began, meeting the questioning gazes of the others. "Something's happening on this planet, and I want to know what it is. We'll start with the basics..."

"Byzel, identified by Sentiologist Tanis and Lieutenant Freya. The second of originally eight planets -- now only seven, with an asteroid belt of fairly recent origin. The inner planet is uninhabitable. The outer planets -- actually, the third and fourth -- are cold and lifeless, although the third could be transformed with only minor difficulties. The fifth planet exploded a few millennia ago, creating the asteroid belt, and still affecting the orbits of the others. The remaining worlds are ice and gas, orbiting far from the star.

"Byzel has two satellites. One exhibits normal rotation, the other retrograde, which makes for some very unusual conjunctions, especially now, when both moons and all the outer planets are aligned.

"It's a fascinating system, with some truly interesting astronomical phenomena -- but since I don't believe in astrology, they're hardly the cause of the recent happenings at this site." She glanced at Gregory.

That Warrior shifted his position on the granite floor. "Life forms are carbon-based, oxygen-using, and water-dependent, as on our home worlds. Main plant forms are desert-adapted shrubs, grasses, and herbs -- no large trees or succulents, as to be expected. Primary animal types are reptilian -- the snakes and lizards -- with a bat-like creature we think is mammalian; maybe a few others. A wide variety of insect species of all kinds. Arachnid types seem quite similar to our Colonial spiders. No birds. This place seems like an oasis; fewer life forms are to be found in the surrounding deserts.

"Our one trip to the western ocean classified a few aquatic forms, with a lot of microscopic life -- plant, animal, and some that might be mineral for all we've been able to figure out. Radagast still has Rakkor, our marine biologist, working on the specimens.

"Nothing unusual about the animals or plants, as far as we can determine. No odd chemical structures... Shouldn't affect us anyway, since we aren't eating anything here. A few species and varieties would be poisonous to us, though, or maybe just incompatible with human systems."

"Medical's found ways to deal with those," Lavanna put in.

Gregory nodded, then shrugged. "So there's nothing about the native life forms that should cause us trouble."

"Nothing in the air or soil, either," Selket added. "I've spent most of my time outside the city, Captain. What exactly are we looking for?"

Diana glanced at Talos. "I should think, Selket, that the assorted cave-ins, accidents, injuries, deaths, and disappearances -- all under suspicious circumstances -- are sufficient reason to wonder if there might not be some malevolent individual or force in operation here. And besides the tangible injuries and general malaise, there are psychological problems. Lavanna?"

The med tech nodded. "Nerves and jitters are common complaints -- lots of hypochondria these last few days. Everyone's on edge. We've had a few fights break out for no apparent reason, especially among the civilians. And some really weird phobias are starting to surface. If Elara were here, she'd be having a field day!"

"What people don't say to the medics, they say to their friends," Hannibal suddenly stated. "Word circulating in the camp is that this city's haunted."

A few of those present fidgeted, averting their eyes in unintentional acknowledgement that they'd heard the rumour -- and maybe even believed it.

"Hardly what one would expect from trained scientists and Warriors," Diana commented. "I'm sure there's a more rational explanation."

"Bad luck?" Talos threw out into the silence.

She glared, although one or two others tittered.

"Do you think somebody's...purposely causing accidents here?" Alexandra inquired. After what she had first chosen to regard as a simple nightmare, alarm was growing in her mind.

"It's a possibility. That, or something native to this planet doesn't like us. Minerva's fall was no accident. Before we shipped her back to the OSIRIS, she was able to tell us she'd been pushed."

Consternation showed on several faces; Gregory, who'd found the woman, glowered darkly.

"Murder?" Selket breathed. "Perhaps Morgan's disappearance was a careful orchestration."

The thought hadn't occurred to Diana. She didn't like it.

It was Lavanna who defended the missing pilot. "If someone's gone over the edge here, for whatever reason, it could be anybody. But I doubt if Morgan's responsible. Personality profile's all wrong, and he vanished before the paranoia..."

The Warriors accepted her word; the lone civilian seemed less sure. "How can we be certain?" Ashur asked.

"I don't think a man could sneak around this camp and not be seen -- especially during the last few days," Hannibal observed. I've had my eye on things... "Someone would've seen him."

Someone has! Diana thought.

"Yeah," Gregory nodded seriously. "If we've got a nut case running loose, he's still with us."

Ashur didn't look any happier, but his protest subsided.

"Sabotage of sites, murder of personnel, a possibly haunted city, rampant paranoia, a probable lunatic at large -- and a storm coming to top us all off," Talos ruminated thoughtfully. "What a wonderful expedition this is turning out to be."

"Nothing more constructive to add?" Diana queried.

"Nothing at this point, lady."

"Anyone else?" No suggestion broke the silence that followed. The redhead sighed, and ended the conference with an exhortation to keep their eyes open and pass along anything suspicious. Very shortly, she and her two fellow captains were alone in the round chamber.

"Anything helpful to suggest now, Talos?" she asked the fair-haired leader of Green Squadron.

He glanced at Hannibal, who raised his eyebrows and nodded. "I believe we can leave a little

private detective work to Hannibal."

"Oh?"

The older man spoke for himself. "Captain Oisin will, of course, continue to direct all public investigations. I, as a mere engineer with no assigned specialities, will be more free to peruse the events of this camp than anyone else. And, not being in the chain of command, my open ears may occasionally pick up stray titbits of information you might not hear yourselves."

"So it seems. All right, Hannibal, find out what you can. But we're running on a tight schedule. If Gaius is right, we'll have major weather problems in a few days; conceivably, we may have to abandon the site entirely. Just now, we have a limited crew to consider; when we return to the OSIRIS, if we really do have a lunatic or two with us, they could vanish..."

Or maybe our crazy will strike there, too, gone completely over the edge...

"And we hardly want to report to the Commander that we're bringing back a murderous madman," Talos added.

"If we're dealing with a madman," Hannibal replied, unconvinced. "We may simply have a well-thought-out vengeance for some old grudge, or a series of unconnected incidents."

Diana shook her head. "We'll keep our options open. I'll see you gentlemen later." Too many options. I'd rather this was the work of one crazy individual, or better still, a series of coincidences. It's silly to even consider Morgan might be guilty of any of this... But it's no better thinking of him as a villain's first victim...

What explanation can there be for seeing him out in the desert?

Morgan, what happened to you...?

* * * * *

Talos caught up with Selket a few centons later. "Good job, Lieutenant," he told her nonchalantly, studying the site as they walked.

"Why'd you want me to suggest Morgan might be responsible for all this? He's gone, likely dead..."

"To see the others' reactions, get some idea how they're feeling about this place. Also, Hannibal's certain news of our meeting will get around camp by this evening. He thinks it'll be helpful if it appears our suspicions are diverted, so our criminal feels more secure. He's usually right. I trust, Selket, that you won't mention that bit to anyone."

"Of course not, Captain," she replied, her tone somewhat smug. He believed her. He'd trust her at his back, or beside him in space -- or with any secret, any time.

* * * * *

Corvus couldn't stop giggling.

"Would you share the joke with the rest of us?" Thoth snarled at the hapless tech. Volsung looked utterly disinterested, while Persephone stared dully at the round arc of ceiling above her. The rest break didn't seem to have done them much good.

The young man ignored him completely.

"Hey!" Thoth grabbed his shoulder, intending to shake him thoroughly; the kid slumped away from him, still laughing.

"There's no joke, Thoth," Persephone roused herself to tell him. She pulled her knees up to her chest. "It's the air. Smell how stale it is? Oxygen deprivation. It's affecting us all."

The words took a moment to sink in. Then the other Warrior sagged against the curved stone wall of the corridor. "That's it, then. We've walked our way to death, deeper and deeper. Nice crypt. Deeper and deeper, darker and darker..." His sing-song voice trailed away.

Volsung turned his head, staring intently past his companions. "I hear it..." he murmured.

"Hear what?" Persephone asked, her eyes unfocussed.

"Water," the tech answered. "I'm thirsty. I'm going for a drink." He lurched to his feet and staggered off like a drunken man, taking one of the arc lanterns with him.

"Waste of time," Persephone enunciated precisely. "No water down here. Whole planet's a dust bowl."

The giggling Corvus crawled after the vanishing circle of light.

"Ought we to follow them?" Thoth asked.

"I guess that's our duty." A few fumbles, and she managed to turn on one of the remaining lanterns. Supporting each other, the two Warriors followed the civilians.

* * * * *

"Captain Diana?" Quetzal announced himself quietly.

The slender woman turned from her two fellow Astrosurvey techs, noting the slight tic in one of the Warrior's eyes, the pallor of his skin, the tight lines around his mouth. She gestured the techs away, and followed Quetzal some distance off.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I found Shari, Captain."

"Good! Where was she?"

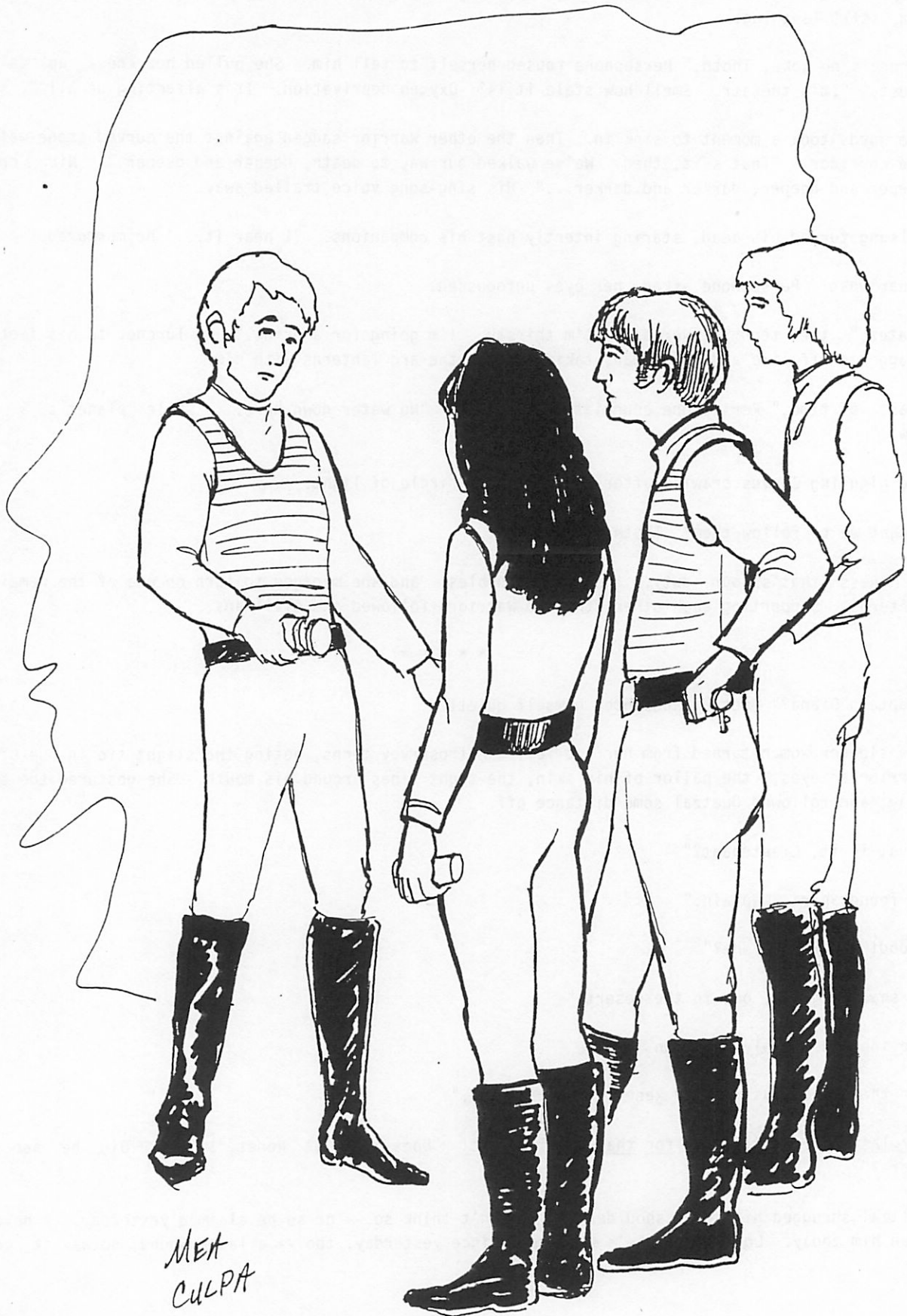
"A shallow grave, out in the desert."

She inhaled sharply. "Go on."

"In the dunes, just beyond Renet's laboratory..."

Her last duty was looking for that sentiologist! "Does he know? Renet, I mean? Did he see her there?"

Quetzal shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't think so -- or so he claimed yesterday. I haven't seen him today. Looks like she's been dead since yesterday, too -- a laser wound, no way it could



be self-inflicted. I thought you should know before I inform Doctor Lupus..."

She nodded savagely. A laser wound, and buried in the desert. We've definitely got a murderer now... "Take him out there -- and two or three Warriors you trust, to bring back the body after his exam. Let me know the results, too, at once. I'll find Captain Oisin..." But not too fast! I'd better talk to Talos and Hannibal first. We're not staying on this planet much longer... I never thought I'd be grateful for a sandstorm...

* * * * *

"What was it you wanted to show me?" Ashur demanded impatiently.

Renet gestured toward his private lab, the sanctum he'd established to conceal certain personal findings he intended to work on by himself -- for his own glory. "Certain artifacts I have discovered in one sector of the city. I have a theory about them. I would really like your opinion, however, before discussing the idea with our peers," he told the epigraphist smoothly.

Ashur looked more interested. His eyes gleamed as he mopped at the sweat on his high forehead.

I knew that would catch you, Renet thought coldly. A few moments more, and you may join Shari in the desert. I finally know what you found, what you believe about this world. And you are right, of course. I believe it, too. With you gone, it becomes my theory, my discovery. I will be the one to announce that humans have trod these sands before, that these ruins house the remains of at least three distinct cultures, and one of them our own species. That will eclipse anything Tanis finds. My name will be the one the future links with Byzel. My reputation will overshadow his...

And Captain Diana must be convinced to remain. We cannot abandon our study before it is complete; there is too much to learn. We cannot leave until I am through with Byzel...

* * * * *

Tanis turned slowly, studying the chamber beneath the dome's high roof. The place was empty of all but dust and a little remaining rubble. Blue pigment of some kind stained the stone above him; the walls, of a different stone, were similarly coloured. From his central position, he could see that the eight dark, shadowy corridors leading off from the vast hall were spaced at 45-degree intervals, extending away like the spokes of a wheel. There was little illumination in those perfectly rounded openings, and no one wanted to venture far into them -- certainly not him!

But there was no treasure in the cool, echoing chamber. There weren't even remains of containers or furnishings that might have held some important secret; there were no apparent vaults, no altar stones, no elaborate markings to signify some religious or political purpose. The hall was simply there, painted blue with eight doors, and with no clues leading anywhere else.

Why? Why did the Guardian indicate this place? What's hidden in this labyrinth? He stooped to pick up a piece of broken, discoloured stone. On one knee, he continued to study the dark doorways. His companions stood behind him, waiting quietly. There has to be something... I wonder if it's through one of these tunnels. We don't have long to search; the Ice Princess wants to be away from here as soon as possible. But how do we decide where to go next?

For a moment, he stared thoughtfully at the floor. Another level, perhaps? But we don't have time to chart this entire maze. And I'm certainly not going to start breaking in floors to see how deep this city extends. I abhor such senseless vandalism.

Round doors... It almost suggests... He shuddered.

"Something wrong?" Freya interrupted.

"No!" he stated flatly, rising abruptly to his feet.

"Well, Tanis, so much for great discoveries." Captain Oisin sounded so smug that the sentiologist wanted to strangle him -- or at least leave him in the dark for the city's current denizens.

"Yeah," he said instead. "Anything on the cause of all the accidents?"

The return volley told; Oisin's mouth tightened in annoyance. "Not yet," he snarled. "Now, if you're all through with your 'study' of this place..."

Tanis contemplated the tunnels. Maybe he could convince the pompous daggit to check them out for him... "Not quite. This is probably a good place to start mapping the under-city. It's pretty centrally located."

"The people you sent out mapping yesterday still haven't come back," the Security Officer pointed out. It was obvious he considered the explorers doomed, since they were accompanied by mere Warriors, and not by his own men.

Freya and Alexandra both bristled noticeably. Neither was particularly fond of Gunnery Sergeant Thoth, but Persephone was a fellow Viper pilot, one of their own, to be protected in her absence.

Before anyone could say anything more, however, they heard an ominous creaking, and felt a slight shudder in the stone beneath their feet.

"Uh Tanis..." Freya began, while Alexandra stared nervously at her feet. Lucas moved toward the rope ladder leading to the surface.

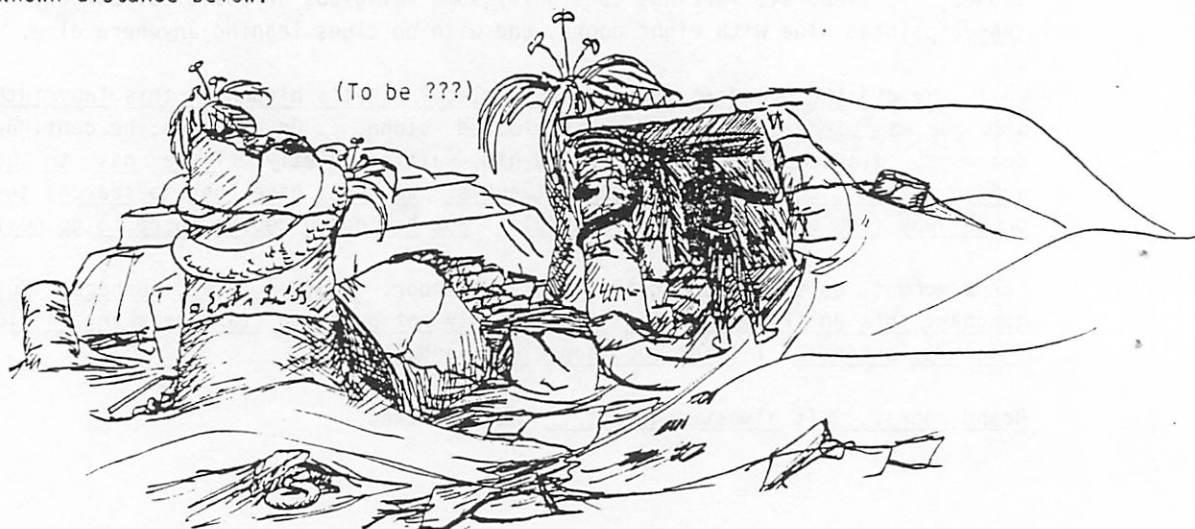
"This planet subject to ground tremors?" Oisin inquired in some confusion.

"No!" Tanis snapped. "Get out of here!"

Somebody above them shouted in alarm, "Look out!"

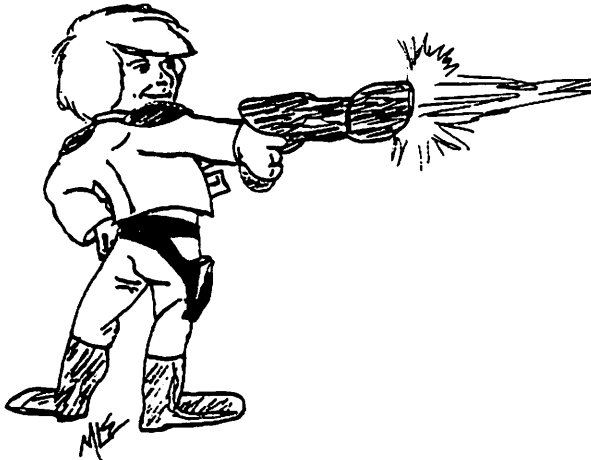
Before Lucas could reach the ladder, the stone creaked again; this time, they could feel it shift.

"Are we digging along a fault line...?" Freya's words were cut off as the floor beneath her collapsed. The five Colonials dropped with the falling stone, given no time to consider what might await them some unknown distance below.



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(By Marcia Brin)



STARBUCK

Wild-flying spirit
Following gold-filled dreams,
Risking all on the turn of a card.



BOOMER

Quiet strength and unswerving loyalty...
Those who know you
Are honoured by your friendship.

BALTAR

Traitor, fuelled by greed and envy,
Do the cries of your people
Disturb your sleep?

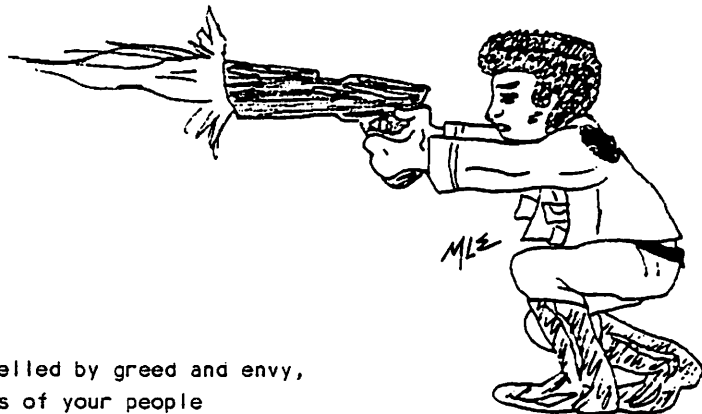
ATHENA

Mother, brother, friends, home...
Dearly loved; forever gone
In the flash of a traitor's smile.



CASSIOPEIA

Ancient arts mask a warm heart
And gentle nature,
Able to capture the rover.



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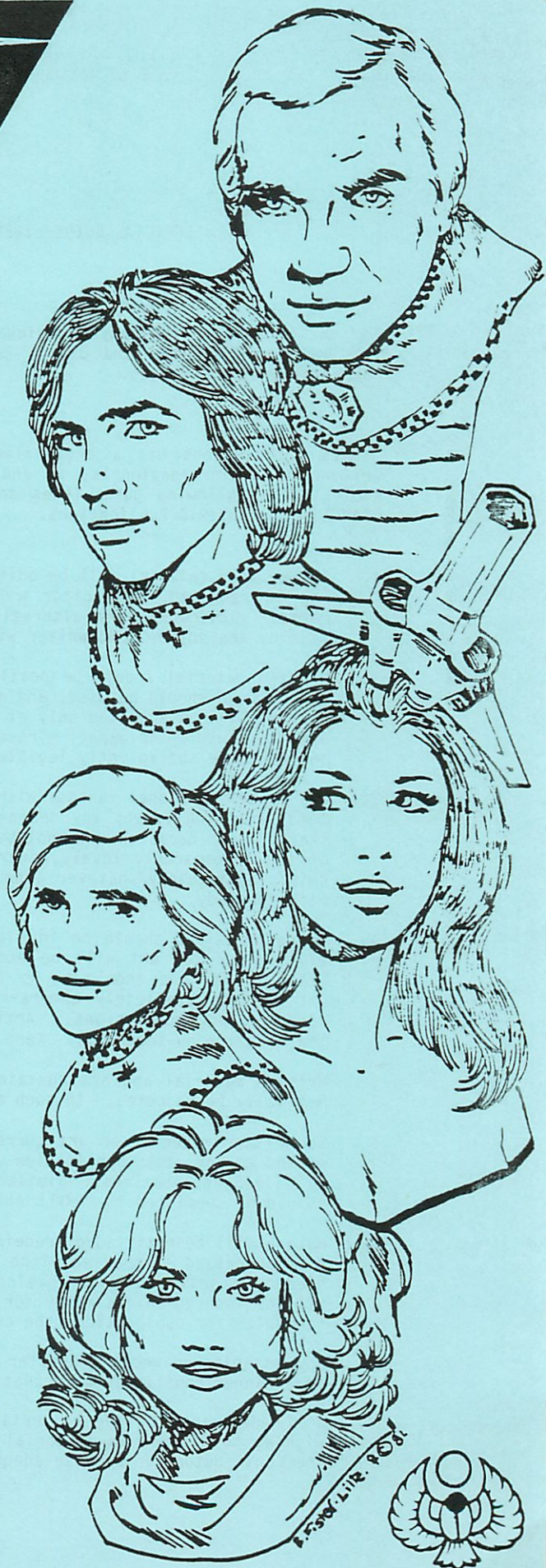
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2. Written material should be neatly typed on 8½ x 11 white paper, double-spaced. Only one side of the page should be used, and all pages must be numbered. Hand-written or hand-printed manuscripts will be accepted only at the discretion of the editor; these should be double-spaced on 8½ x 11 lined white paper. The editorial staff reserves the right to reject any manuscript not deemed to be sufficiently legible.
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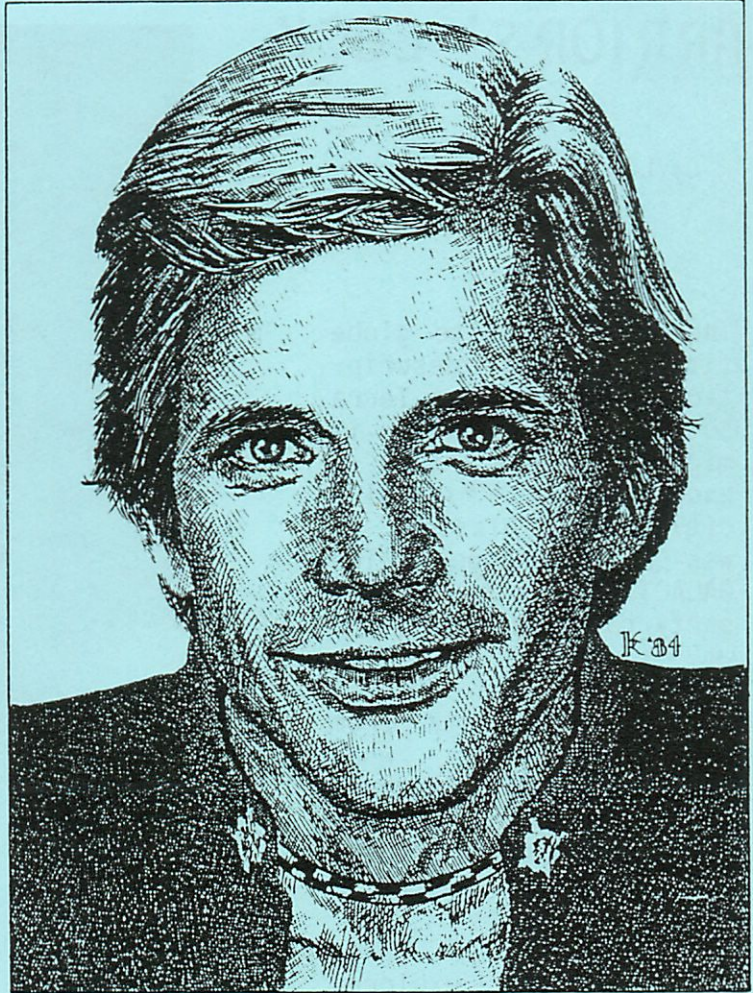


MURMURS

by *Honore Bryte*

Starbuck thought he was dying; he'd been given a death sentence. A degenerative nerve disorder had already slowed his reflexes, barred him from flying, and taken from him all that might make his last sections bearable.

He sought oblivion -- and met his future in an ethereal dark-haired woman, garbed in shimmering white.



...He felt awe and terror building within himself... He couldn't help it. Taking her face gently between his hands, he kissed her forehead. Her lips were too sacred...

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WARRIORS' LUCK

By Linda Ruth Pfonner

The blue-and-white globe fit Michael's description of the planet Terra so perfectly that it might have been a twin -- except that Michael's city wasn't blasted; it was just abandoned. The GALACTICA™ sent a landing party to investigate.

Things went badly from the beginning, when Sheba's Viper crashed. She wasn't hurt, but the small fighter was a total loss.

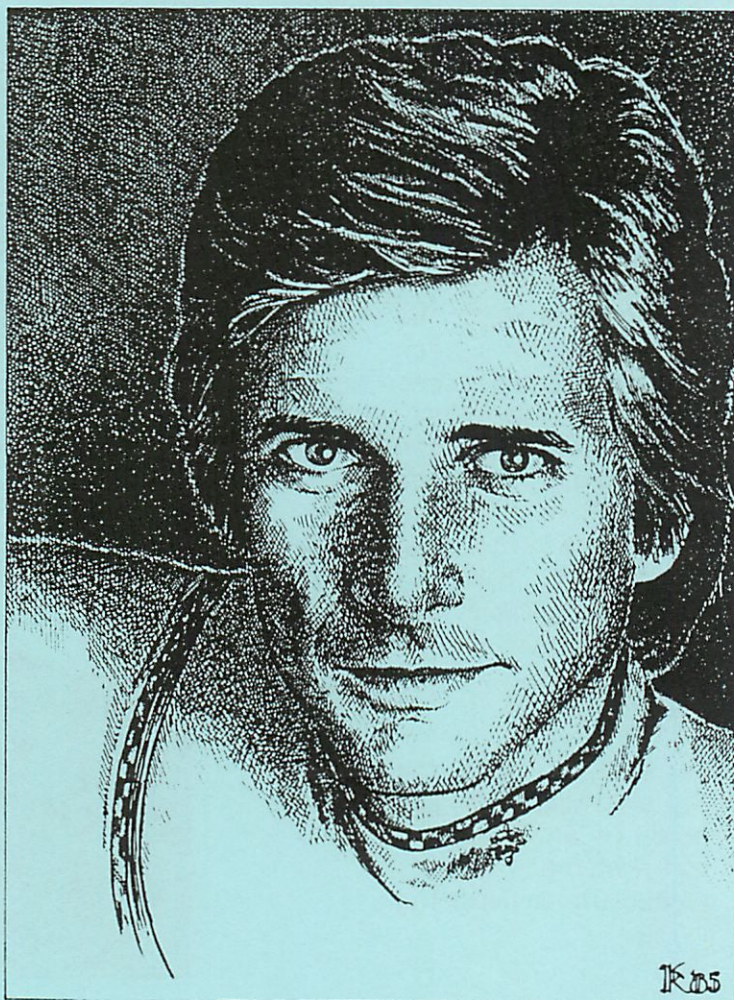
Then, as they explored the ruins of what had once been some great public edifice, Starbuck and Athena found Room A...and Jiesser...

And the nightmare began.

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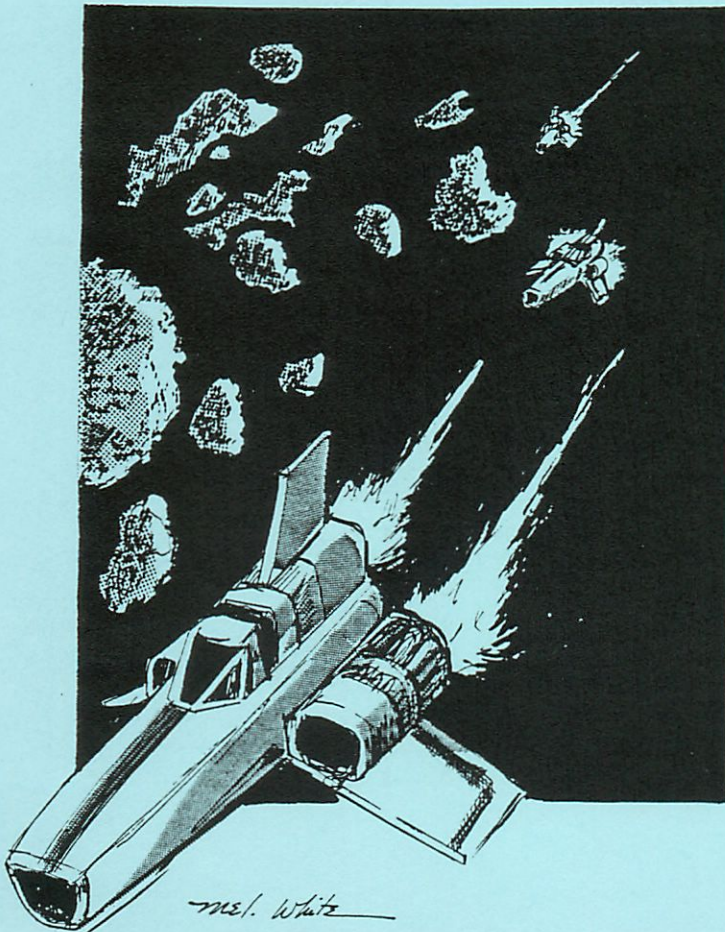
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(By Lee Gaul and Sharon Monroe)

Molukai was a crossroads planet, approximately midway between the Colonial Alliance and the Delphian Empire, the centre of a vast trade network that spanned several quadrants. A single planet with one natural satellite, circling an old red star, it had been inhabited by a succession of space-faring non-native sapient species for over fifty millennia.

The system maintained a precarious neutrality in the Colonial-Cylon™ War, while struggling to retain its independence from the growing, militaristic Delphian Empire.



But now, a Cylon™ force was threatening the system's autonomy; and, to prevent an outright take-over, the Fifth Colonial Fleet, led by Commander Cain and the battlestar™ PEGASUS, was ordered to "visit" the besieged Molukai on a "goodwill" mission...

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